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# Indigenous Peoples, Land-based Disputes and Strategies of Socio-Spatial Resistance at Agricultural Frontiers

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## The Indigeneity of Frontier Making

Development frontiers are not just remote areas of the world where new socio-economic relations emerge on top of previous socio-spatial conditions. The space of the frontier has a complex, multifaceted configuration in which both the hyper-new and what is considered obsolete coalesce. Frontier making both brings the potentiality for modernisation and, more importantly, the long-lasting problems of core spatial areas to the emerging frontier spaces (Ioris, 2018a). This involves the dislocation, incorporation and exploitation of an existing state of affairs translated into novel opportunities to succeed, earn and accumulate. Among the many groups affected, Indigenous peoples have vividly experienced the complex interplay of clashes, violence and resistance due to their brutal insertion in the process of frontier making. Discourses of sovereignty and legitimacy certainly underwrote “settler colonialism’s desire to uproot and destroy the place-based autonomies of Indigenous peoples in the relentless acquisition of ever more land and resources” (Larsen & Johnson, 2017, p. 4). Colonial and national development enterprises were coordinated attempts to affirm the power of nation states and create sources of wealth and economic rents out of the subjugation or displacement of Indigenous peoples, with survivors normally forced to seek refuge in remote areas, already occupied by other groups, and which would later be incorporated again in a new round of frontier making. The opening of new socio-economic spaces was a devastating blow that went far beyond only land or resource grabbing: it has been a true phenomenon of world-grabbing in the sense that it has been an attempt to reduce lives and landscapes to the language of money and profit.

It is remarkable that the involvement of Indigenous peoples in frontier making, although widely studied throughout the world, still demands further conceptual and empirical scrutiny. Unlike migrant peasants, miners, construction workers or farmers, Indigenous peoples had

already been living in the areas converted into frontiers, which raises an important question regarding how they differ from, and engage with, other subaltern groups involved in frontier making activity. Most academic texts focus on the imposition of a new socio-spatial order by the settler states on Indigenous peoples, at the expense of pre-existing institutions such as common ownership of land, a self-sufficient economy, nomadic stateless life and spiritual bonds to the land (Yiftachel & Fenster, 1997), among other similar topics. They typically examine how the original inhabitants of the territory were obliged to retreat in the face of the advance of the new frontier, forcing them into situations of acute exploitation, deprivation and overcrowding. However, such literature has frequently overlooked the perceptions, the inventiveness, the active reactions and the complex ontology of Indigenous peoples. It is only since the 1970s that their voices and political subjectivity have started to attract better recognition. Indigenous groups are the quintessential targets of resource colonialism and the theft of land and resources (Parson & Ray, 2018), but their history, geography and agency did not end with the loss of their land and decimation of members of their society. On the contrary, they continue to claim unique identities and political voices in daily life activities and strive to maintain attachments to places under difficult circumstances.

The purpose of this text is to make use of the notion of frontier making to understand the socio-spatial trajectory and the production of Indigenous spaces, which was also treated as part of the collective effort to expand the theoretical and methodological references of ethnopolitical studies (Salehyan, 2017). The discussion will concentrate on the emblematic pattern of frontier making experienced by the Kaiowa, one of the Guarani peoples of South America. This article is based on 48 interviews (conducted in Guarani and then translated into Portuguese and English), regular meetings with Indigenous communities, analysis of documents and attendance of public events during fieldtrips between 2017 and 2020. The research was planned and conducted following a careful ethics protocol and with a constant reflection on the moral, political and social responsibilities of a non-Indigenous researcher when dealing with highly sensitive issues. The departing point was the recognition that the ethnopolitical demands of Indigenous peoples are complex, multiple and constantly changing because of old legacies and ongoing problems. The human geography of the Guarani-Kaiowa encapsulates unique challenges related to their location, specific geographical settings and particular involvement in the wider process of modernisation and regional development. Their contemporary condition is not only shaped by constant attacks and the pain of losing their land, but also by the resolve to resist and take the political initiative. Consequently, it was necessary to interrogate the world

from the perspective of the Indigenous communities involved in the study, rethinking universal concepts and searching for alternative socio-economic and political pathways.

The majority of the Guarani-Kaiowa (around 45,000 individuals) live in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul around and to the south of the city of Dourados, often sharing reserves and lands with other ethnic groups. An equivalent population of the same Kaiowa ethnicity occupies the other side of the Paraguayan border, where they are known as the Pai Tavytera. Economic activity in the region has intensified in recent decades due to the expansion of export-oriented agribusiness and growing land speculation. Even in regularised Indigenous reserves, the population feel bitterly discriminated against and marginalised by the rest of society, leading to growing frustration and multiple forms of violence. Out of the total number (1,119) of murders of Indigenous individuals in Brazil between 2003 and 2017, 461 cases (41.19%) occurred in Mato Grosso do Sul (CIMI, 2018a), particularly affecting the Guarani-Kaiowa. Those trends are related to overcrowded settlements, chronic malnutrition, usurpation of ancestral lands and disregard or attacks from agribusiness farmers, mainstream politicians, authorities and the business community. Even worse, Guarani-Kaiowa communities have had alarming rates of suicide (555 between 2001-2011, according CIMI, the Indigenist Missionary Council) and premature deaths (including a growing number of children hit by cars) are much higher among Indigenous families than in the rest of society. In recent years, the Guarani-Kaiowa continued to be systematically harassed by the police and by private militias hired by land owners, but have also entailed a fierce campaign to return to their original areas, as can be seen in the following interview extract:

“First the farmer removed us from the forest, threw us in front of the [Evangelical] mission, and from there we went to Sassoró [Indigenous reserve near the border with Paraguay], stayed in the main office, we stayed there for some time, then we moved here [to Jaguapiré]. We established an encampment here, over there [points with the finger]. My uncle and my grandma sat down, talked, and told us to stay together, and we stayed with more people. When we had a large number of people, the farmer called the police and they removed us to Porto Lindo, in a great crowd. Then there many relatives, from several locations, came and joined us. My grandpa and grandma asked relatives scattered in various locations to come and be with us. They told us, ‘this is really our land’, I was only eight then, but I remember, I paid attention to what they were saying. It was four or five years since we had been removed from the area, but we managed to come back. But when we arrived, what was forest before was converted into pasture, cattle, a ranch. (...)

We are here now and our community is growing. I tell my children, I take them to the limits of our land and show them the evidence, tell them the names of the places, Yvaundy here, the other there is Jakura jeroky, old names, but I don't forget, I tell them to learn, write down and teach their own children later. This is our land, my grandma always said, that is why I tell you that, and tell them. There is no other owner. [woman, Jaguapiré Indigenous Land]

This interview demonstrates that, more than economic, political and environmental refugees, the Guarani-Kaiowa were expatriated in their own territory, as they have been systematically marginalised from the benefits of development and forced to live in newly created, and constantly reinforced, socio-spatial edges. Among the thousands of Guarani-Kaiowa in Mato Grosso do Sul, a great part live in congested, degraded reserves (Figure 1) and around a quarter live in urban areas or in encampments along the roads. This is a very unsettled and painful socio-spatial situation that evolves through survival strategies amid threats of assimilation, annexation and extinction. Despite using social media to promote their cause, the Guarani-Kaiowa are much less visible, for example, than national and international NGOs because of internet algorithmic filtering, which deliberately excludes some types of political discourse, segregates social groups and suppresses divergent perspectives (Ochigame & Holston, 2016). Shocking poverty, unrelenting racism and prolonged suffering of the Guarani-Kaiowa constitute the (apparently) hidden, but (certainly) appalling socio-political rationality of an agribusiness-centred regional economy. That raises important methodological, ethical and epistemological questions demands about how to conduct ethnopolitical investigations with, together and for the Indigenous peoples.



Figure 1: Amambai Indigenous Reserve, Mato Grosso do Sul (all pictures by the author)

The interpretation of those trends and tendencies required more than the usual participatory action research, but an engaged approach that recognised local systems of knowledge and practice as fully authoritative and the actors involved as sufficiently competent to design, conduct and evaluate the research they are involved in. It was a movement away from representing the Other and towards collective problem-solving, activism and advocacy (Coombes et al., 2014). Indigenous participants were more than informants or collaborators, but had to be treated as co-researchers, co-ethnologists, co-creators. Indigenous practices and identities are fluid, their narratives and engagement with place and space are mutable, not linear; all this invites and prompts experimentation, innovation, affection and partnerships (Coombes et al., 2011; Murton, 2012; Ramos, 2018). Those concerns are closely associated with the emerging ‘critical geographies of indigeneity’ (Radcliffe, 2017), meaning, in particular, an appreciation of landscape as a framework for addressing basic human rights, that is, the role of a ‘right to the landscape’ in the movement towards justice, dignity and wellbeing, integrating the spiritual and cultural values of land and local communities (Egoz et al., 2011). The landscape becomes part of what people are through everyday life experiences, as the Indigenous people create meaningful relationships and connections with land as their main source of survival (Ingold, 1993). The next section will examine the evolution of the Guarani-Kaiowa landscapes, the dramatic advance of socio-spatial frontiers and the consolidation of an agribusiness-based economy at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous peoples.

### **The Avalanche of Frontier Making ...**

The Guarani peoples of South America are relatively well known because of their presence in the reductions organised and managed by Spanish Jesuit priests in the La Plata River Basin during the 17th and 18th centuries. Some readers may also be informed about the ongoing violence against the Guarani-Kaiowa of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul. But few will be fully aware of the scale of land rights violations, systematic killing of adults and children, ferocious discrimination against people living in precarious settlements along the roads or in the periphery of the cities, widespread suicides of young people and teenagers, and disturbing levels of insalubrity and food insecurity. The Guarani-Kaiowa have been exposed to the worst side of agricultural frontier making, affected by land-grabbing, displaced from their ancestral lands, confined to minuscule reserves and have experienced widespread socio-ecological exploitation. The situation of the Guarani-Kaiowa under the advance of soybean and sugarcane production (among other crops) is the embodiment of marked genocidal trends, following Short's (2016) definition, including cultural destruction, social death and ecological devastation as equally important genocidal practices. Rather than focusing on legalistic notions of 'intent' by frontier settlers and governments, it is relevant to acknowledge the destructive potential of the systematic socio-spatial devaluation and marginalisation. Guarani-Kaiowa life based on common land managed by large families and regular movement around the region has been (partly but forcefully) substituted by the commodification of labour, land and nature.

It is crucial to observe that the advance of the socio-spatial frontier over Indigenous land in Brazil was not only violent and disruptive, but primarily illegal. The legal system has long guaranteed the formal rights of Indigenous peoples and the protection of their social and material needs, however that did not prevent the concession, after 1880, of millions of hectares of Guarani-Kaiowa land to Matte Larangeira, a transnational corporation that profited from the native mate herb (*erva-mate*, botanically *Ilex paraguariensis*) through the exploitation and even the scandalous, but tolerated, enslavement of Indigenous populations (Chamorro, 2015). A few decades later, in the context of the paternalistic ideals promoted by Marshal Rondon, eight reserves were created between 1915 and 1928 (initially with 3,600 hectares each, later reduced following land grabbing by the surrounding farmers) by the newly established, and highly inefficient and corrupt, Indian Protection Service (SPI); interestingly, the SPI (later converted into a new agency, FUNAI) was in itself an important institutional achievement, having been created by Nilo Peçanha, the first Afro-descendent president of Brazil, but it was an ineffective agency before the power of the rural landowners. This was a process of tacit 'containment' in small reserves, where it was expected that Indigenous peoples would be assimilated into the rest of national society (Brand, 1997), similar to the policies implemented in the United States at the

end of the 19th century. Because of the limited space and the agglomeration of different groups and families in very small areas, the reserves have been hotspots for tensions and growing frustration (CIMI, 2001). The concentration of people facilitated the utilisation of badly paid Indigenous labour, which guaranteed the economic insertion of the Guarani-Kaiowa in the economy of the frontier and to some extent preserved their (highly subordinate) participation in regional society.

After 1920, large farms began to be opened by migrants attracted to the region from the south of Brazil and incentivised by the national government. A sequence of policies and legislation promoted the privatisation of ecosystems, deforestation and monoculture-based agribusiness. The region where most Guarani-Kaiowa live in Mato Grosso do Sul is famous for its red soils with great agricultural aptitude and that were rapidly appropriated by the new farmers. Several migratory waves of people from Rio Grande do Sul moved to Mato Grosso in the first decades of the new century and then again in the 1950s and 1960s following the cancellation of the territorial concession granted to Matte Larangeira and growing competition with *erva-mate* produced in Argentina (leading to the eventual demise of the corporation). New legislation was introduced by the Brazilian military dictatorship in 1973 – the Indian Statute<sup>1</sup> – but this basically maintained the assimilationist approach and did not resolve the growing gap between actually existing reserves and the many sites claimed by the Guarani-Kaiowa as their legitimate land. A more recent phase began in the 1990s with the intensification of an agribusiness-based economy and the exponential growth of plantation farms. Local changes were a direct reflection of national trends and the power of the agribusiness sector, which included a broad coalition between landowners, conservative politicians, banks, industry and transnational corporations (Ioris, 2018b). Agribusiness has been naturalised as above party disputes, as something that is supposedly intrinsically beneficial to the country so that any obstacle, including the rights of Indigenous groups, must be removed, at any cost. In this sense, it has largely hijacked the political debate and forced the approval of highly questionable policies and legislation, as in the case of the new forest code, changes in labour regulation and the attraction of international investment funds (Ioris, 2017).

Agribusiness activity in areas of agricultural frontier, such as Mato Grosso do Sul, has given rise to even higher levels of speculation, dispossession of common land and wide-ranging aggression against those with different interests. The process of frontier making created

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the term ‘Indian’ is still prevalent in Brazil (even used by the Indigenous individuals, as in our interviews) but it has been increasingly avoided in academic and non-academic texts because of the negative connotations it evokes.



favourable conditions for the arrival of unscrupulous individuals in search of rapid enrichment and for the collective acceptance of morally questionable economic and political practices. The recipe for serious socio-spatial conflicts is then complete: on one side, adventurers and speculators reinvented as ‘agri-food producers’ (the euphemism often used by agribusiness farmers to describe themselves in a more positive fashion) and, on the other, marginalised native peoples who have been living in the region for many generations in a context of contrasting relations with land and society. The failure to meet Indigenous peoples’ legitimate demands and the invalidation of even their most basic human rights are clear signs of the institutional racism that pervades the Brazilian state and of how its ideology of modernisation has been constructed at the expense of, and against, subaltern sectors of society. Instead of legal rights over their land, the Guarani-Kaiowa have only been offered backdoor access to regional space, bearing in mind that since the early 20th century farms have been opened in areas illegally expropriated by farmers and the government. The recurrent violence against the legitimate proprietors of the land – the Indigenous groups themselves – is in direct breach of the fundamental principles of the Brazilian constitution. However, the enforcement of the legislation by local judges, civil servants and politicians typically rules in favour of the most powerful economic sectors.

The dominant ideology of an ‘Indian without time’ (i.e. idealised, according to the colonial mindset criticised above, as a savage who, to be genuine, has to be confined to the past that permeates school textbooks and the public imaginary) gives support to the idea of an ‘Indian without space’ (no rights over land, no need for land, no space) because they have lost their right to land insofar as they are no longer seen as ‘real Indians’. This is an example of the “tyranny of authenticity” that threatens to exclude individuals and groups who do not fit some narrow criteria set for membership (Lennox & Short, 2016). It has been a regular, everyday experience of social, ecological and physical violence and a difficult struggle for the Guarani-Kaiowa to see their rights recognised. Amidst a hyper-violent situation that affects both the dead and the living – further aggravated by the election in October 2018 of a far right-wing administration, which disorganised the modest state apparatus in charge of supporting social demands and immediately triggered new waves of cowardly attacks on Indigenous groups and many other racial minorities, as widely reported by the national and international media in recent years – the Guarani-Kaiowa have reacted according to their means and formed some limited but important alliances with national and international organisations, universities and churches. They have, therefore, disrupted the pace and the configuration of frontier making, leading to a mosaic of spaces, as discussed next.

### ... but a Vibrant Indigenous Geography in the Making

The Guarani-Kaiowa, among numerous other Indigenous peoples in South America, had their territories invaded and social practices disrupted as part of the wider process of frontier making. The socio-spatial frontier enthralled them like an avalanche and triggered a long process of aggression, intolerance and forced assimilation. The ‘Kaiowa problem’ – more accurately, the problem brought to the Guarani-Kaiowa and their forced conversion into a problem, following Ribeiro (2015) – has been an acute process of commodification (in the 19th century of forests and labour, and in the 20th century of land, labour and water), facilitated by the production of racialised spaces that marginalised populations in their own territory. While the Guarani-Kaiowa were historically at the margins of official national history, frontier making left them even more ostracised and oppressed than during the colonial years. Out of the four million hectares originally occupied by the Guarani-Kaiowa in the region, Indigenous families were left with around 40,000 hectares of regularised land spread across various reserves and resettlements (Benites, 2014; Brand, 1998; Cavalcante, 2014). Some reserves are preposterously small (only a few hectares per family, or even less, as in the case of the Dourados reserve, where 15,000 people live on only 3,000 hectares) and land tenure is not clear because of objections from farmers and other business sectors (even after the lengthy process of regularisation). Despite all this, the Guarani-Kaiowa have demonstrated an unfailing ability to adapt to the new world order and to retain crucial socio-geographical knowledge that certainly helps them in their struggle for land and recognition. Combining multiple strategies, which have included settling in remote corners of the large farms, seeking employment outside the reserves, making their voices heard in public and forming strong internal and external networks, Indigenous communities have managed to engage with the advancing frontier and, in recent years, secured some modest but nonetheless tangible political and territorial successes.

Through the mobilisation of their customs and religious values, the Guarani-Kaiowa have vividly replicated, according to their own circumstances and way of life [*ava reko*], shared elements of the social and agrarian transformation that has been taking place around the world in the last few centuries of capitalist history. It is a dynamic geography of general similarities or commonalities, but also with distinctive politico-ecological characteristics. Guarani-Kaiowa existence is particularly characterised by a scalar and deeply religious conception of space, from the household to the network of settlements and Indigenous reserves. According to their cosmovision, people do not own or trade the land, but live there, sharing it with other creatures and constantly having to negotiate their conditions; these creatures hold or belong to the spirits

[*jaras*], whose categorisation depends on the relations established between humans and non-humans (Pereira, 2010). These experiences are constantly mobilised in favour of their daily survival and, in cases of dispossession, the prospect of returning to the lost areas. The skilled resistance of Indigenous groups demonstrates both the inadequacies of the modernising project and the resilience of non-Western societies when protecting livelihoods and traditional practices. In this way, Guarani-Kaiowa groups have become one of the most active geographical protagonists in the region, constantly trying to adapt and respond to pressures, as well as protect and restore elements of their previous condition. This is materialised in the diversity of spaces through which the Guarani-Kaiowa subvert and complicate the course of frontier making, as described in the suggested typology:

**Indigenous reserves** – despite serious management problems, reserves constitute the most stable spaces available to the Guarani-Kaiowa, largely accepted by wider society and reasonably well protected by the state. The reserves were established in two main phases. The first involved the creation of the eight SPI reserves, with a total of around 18,000 hectares, in the first decades of the 20th century. The process imposed the ‘peasant model’ on the Guarani-Kaiowa, fixing them in certain state-owned areas where the land can be cultivated by the community (Oliveira, 1983). This was certainly not a stress-free process, given that not all the reserves were established in the original areas where Indigenous families used to live, but merely observed bureaucratic convenience (most of these first reserves even had their area reduced due to pressure from neighbouring farmers and with the help of corrupt civil servants). Against the will and the traditions of the Indigenous people, the land in the reserves was divided into private lots, which is directly in conflict with their tradition of common land [*tekohakuaaba*]. One very serious issue was the accommodation of different extended families or ethnic groups (Guarani-Kaiowa, Guarani-Ñandeva and Terena) in the same reserve, which only generates new tensions and nurtures disputes. Levels of violence and crime in the reserves are directly or indirectly related to growing frustration with persistent abandonment, racism and discrimination. In the following extract there is an indication of the mounting problems and the perceived negative influence in the overcrowded, original eight reserves:

“In the Reserve, there is a lot of movement, new things that we did not have before. Years ago it was really beautiful, but now the difficulties are very high, because it is not our [world], it really hurts, it is not nice, it is not good for us. The school reduces our culture, our way of being, although I accept that it is necessary, we learn a lot in the

school. Justice [the legal system] is also very harmful, because they do things not in the manner that is ours. The other thing that ‘enters’ here is [Evangelical] religion, which is not ours, that is why I say, if people go there they need to tell the truth, not only half the truth; the evangelicals who attend those churches create lots of problems for us. So the movement here is tremendous.” [man, religious leader, Jaguapiru Indigenous Reserve near Dourados]

The second phase of reserve formation was launched by the approval of a new Brazilian constitution in 1988, which officially recognised Indigenous lands (Article 231) as areas traditionally and permanently occupied and indispensable for Indigenous peoples’ productive activities, for preservation of environmental resources needed for their well-being and for the reproduction of values, customs and traditions. The same constitutional article determines the nullification of any act that led to the occupation or appropriation of Indigenous lands, stating that these are inalienable and the rights over them are imprescriptible. The problem for the Guarani-Kaiowa has been the lack of enforcement of these formal rights and their refusal to consent to the confiscation of their lands. There is always a protracted struggle through the various layers of the judiciary, with endless appeals and explicit political pressure exerted on local judges (normally themselves large landowners and members of wealthy regional families).

**Roadside encampments** – Because of organisational, behavioural and demographic problems in the official reserves, a significant proportion of the Guarani-Kaiowa people have opted, or were forced, to move out and live in encampments next to the main motorways and secondary roads. These encampments can either be relatively permanent sites of residence (there are cases of families who stay in such dreadful conditions for many decades) or temporary campsites for families hoping to move back to reclaimed areas [*retomada*, see next item]. In both cases, people living in encampments maintain close connections with relatives in other sites and in the reserves, always with the expectation of better conditions and the hope to return to the areas where they or their families used to live. The Guarani-Kaiowa have resolutely resisted the antagonistic rationality that led to the fragmentation and privatisation of space, closely promoted and coordinated by the national state (Barbosa & Mura, 2011). The space of the encampment, regardless of the unpleasant and insalubrious circumstances, is also a space of anticipation and potentiality. There is a constant threat posed by farmers and paramilitaries (as aforementioned, militias hired by farmers and rural companies, normally employing retired or active policemen). There are also serious dangers of road traffic accidents and fire coming from sugarcane fields

ahead of the harvest. Despite recurrent cases of atrocious violence, the police express little interest in finding those responsible for the crimes, and the judicial system is quite unprepared to punish. These forms of treatment only fuel resentment and, paradoxically, lead more individuals to join roadside encampments ahead of future *retomadas*, what is evident in the two interviews below recorded in the Kurupi encampment:

“I am 69 [man], we live here in the Kurupi. Most of my family died, now it is only myself, my wife and my sister-in-law. The farmers expelled us from our land and we had to stay here. I used to work in the farms, raised my family in the Rio Brillhante region. I have a son, four daughters, one is living with us here. We do need land, I want to cultivate it, my wife wants to have [domestic] animals, but where we are it is not possible. That is why we think and long for that land near here that is our original settlement.”

“I am 91 [woman], we live here along the road, we cannot have chicken, because the cars kill them; we cannot plant anything, we have nothing. Where we once lived, we had banana, maize, watermelon, sweet potato, cassava, we had. But we had to abandon everything, when they pushed us out, they threatened us, we were scared, and had to go, in the middle of the night, they ran over us, threatening in many different ways, scaring us, we left everything. We had a lovely forest there, but they cut it all down.”

**Areas of *Retomada*** – literally, *retomada* means ‘taking back’, but more significantly it implies reaction and spatial re-occupation to reclaim traditional territories. The *retomada* is the return to the ancestral places where the older Guarani-Kaiowa generations were expelled, especially in the 1950s or 1960s (many elders are still alive and able to testify to their connection with the intended places). Through the *retomadas*, “indigenous families reoccupy areas where they can carry out their community life, establishing their dwellings, planting smallholdings, and practicing their ritual and religious life” (Oliveira, 2018, p. 12). The long and difficult journey of the communities to recover lands lost to development through the *retomadas* can be seen below:

“I am a Guarani man, born in 1959, and I have lived here in the *tekoha* Jarara for almost 23 years.<sup>2</sup> The recovery of this area required several *retomadas*, the first in 1980, the second in 1984. In 1990 the whole area [of the farm] was burned, pastures, crops, and then we came back in 1996, determined to resist and stay, we entered the area on 23 of

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<sup>2</sup> See below for a discussion of the symbolic and political importance of the *tekoha*.

March, and I have been here since that day, for 23 years, fighting the police, state and municipal authorities, it was a long road to take over our land. Thanks to God, we won and now we have all the documents. We always work hard and whenever my relatives need, I am ready to help them [in other areas] to regularise their land. (...) We have secured so far only 471 hectares and there is much more, 7,800 hectares that we are still fighting for. We are gauging the right moment to take the farmer to court, counting on the help of the anthropologist, waiting to see if the situation can be sorted out by government [administratively]. That is it, we are always waiting.”

The *retomada* is basically a political expedient of peasant-like resistance that relies on the construction of material, organisational and ideological means for its utilisation (Ferreira, 2007). After a frustrating wait and exasperation with unfulfilled promises, Indigenous political and religious leaders realised that the official approach of reserve creation was misleading and would never address their economic and cultural needs. These leaders (invariably, obvious targets for new assassinations) organised a group to take action and evict the actual invaders (the current farmers) and make an attempt to self-demarcate their legitimate lands. *Retomadas* are moments of rupture, when dominant politics is subverted and indigeneity can emerge not only as referential, but as a transformative force. Figure 2 shows a *retomada* taking place in 2020 in an agribusiness farm near the city of Dourados.



Figure 2: Area Being Reclaimed through a *Retomada* in 2020

The fundamental difference between the original SPI reserves and *retomada* areas is that the operationalisation and risks involved in these initiatives are exclusively those of the

Indigenous groups, beyond the tutelage of the state. “Given the nonexistence of other efficient alternatives, the retakings [*retomadas*] have turned into the main strategy of Indigenous people for recognition of their territorial rights, at present, having been incorporated as a flag of struggle by the Indigenous movement... They constitute a post-tutelary form of the exercise of the policy by the Indians, implying a different mode of conceiving their relationship with the State” (Oliveira, 2018, p. 13). In any case, there is a direct connection between the old reserves and the *retomadas* in the form of alliances and collaboration; in the words of an Indigenous school teacher interviewed in 2019, “the reserve is the place to prepare new *retomadas*, not only the space for us to live. The ‘whites’ believed that the reserves would settle the ‘problem’, satisfy the Guaraní-Kaiowa, but this was not sufficient to control the *guata*” (see below). CIMI registered at least 88 areas demanded by the Guaraní-Kaiowa, but the list is certainly much longer (Morais, 2017) and the struggle is now to recover plots much larger than the old reserves (*retomadas* from farmers with more than 10,000 hectares), which of course infuriates the agribusiness community and allied judges and politicians. It is crucial to note that this autonomous movement is more than just a form of Indigenous agrarian reform, but expands into an intense site of spatiogenesis where traditions, new influences and articulation with other sites and other groups converge to consolidate the newly retaken land. Our ethnographic work has revealed that the *retomadas* is an area of intense political interaction and socio-spatial reconfiguration, as can be seen below:

“My Indigenous name is Kuña Rendy. When my daughter was very small, the ‘whites’ displaced us from our original area, we had to leave. (...) Now we live here in the area that we recovered, that I and my family had to suffer a lot to regain. And now we are getting better, what makes me very happy, our live is improving, makes me happy, we are fine. But before, we suffered a lot, we had to endure so many bad things. The farmers used to come and fire on us with their guns. (...) That is what I have to say, we have been here for about nine years now, suffering, but things are fortunately getting better.” [woman, Pueblito Kue]

“We recuperated this area in 2009, I took part with my relatives. I have been in the struggle ever since. We entered here, stayed eight days in this place and then the farmers [who had occupied the Indigenous land] started to arrive, exactly on the 8 December. In the next day, early in the morning, around 5:00 o’clock, they attacked us, each one trying to find shelter, they hurt us, many were seriously injured. Maria [all fictitious names] was

badly hurt, she was shot several times in the legs, everything was broken, and she has a rubber bullet stuck in her arm; my cousin José he was shot in the stomach with rubber bullet ammunition that burst his belly, he endured the pain for two years, then he died. (...) After that, the whites took us by force to the Sassoró reserve, threw us there. Not everybody there agreed with our struggle, but we had to come back here, this is our traditional land, the land is ours. Two years later, my relatives and I were very unhappy, we got more information, and we came to the conclusion that we had to do something or we would completely lose our land. So, we left the reserve, brought our things, and went to the *retomada* again. Because from the moment you start fighting to regain your land, you can never give up, you must continue with the fight, we retake what was ours, we entered that place, where our traditional settlement was, where Pueblito Kue is.”

**Globalised Guarani-Kaiowa space** – another important space competently produced by the Guarani-Kaiowa as part of their political agenda of survival and territorial affirmation is an international arena of protest, involving a network that includes academics, artists and multilateral organisations. In the last few years, various Guarani-Kaiowa leaders have been interviewed by global media channels, invited to speak in international forums and taken part in publications, movies and documentaries. The insertion of the Guarani-Kaiowa in the globalised space is evidently related to broader Indigenous movements around the world (see Lennox & Short, 2016). The activism of the Guarani-Kaiowa in national and international circles indicates that their leaders have realised the importance of employing an effective, articulate discourse and learning to engage with non-Indigenous players. Public outrage over the Guarani-Kaiowa genocide has soared across the world and triggered multiple reactions. For instance, on 24 November 2016, the European Parliament approved a resolution that strongly condemned “the violence perpetrated against the indigenous communities of Brazil”, deplored “the poverty and human rights situation of the Guarani-Kaiowa population in Mato Grosso do Sul”, reminded “the Brazilian authorities of their obligation to observe international human rights standards with respect to indigenous peoples” and, among other things, expressed “concern about the proposed constitutional amendment 215/2000 (PEC 215), to which Brazilian Indigenous peoples are fiercely opposed, given that, if approved, it will threaten ancestral land rights by making it possible for anti-Indian interests related to the agro-business, timber, mining and energy industries to block the new Indigenous territories from being recognised.” The approval of this new legislation, although supported by the new Brazilian president, would have terrible



consequences for the Guarani-Kaiowa and would make more difficult the return to their traditional territories.

**Spectral space** – the Guarani-Kaiowa background contrasts with the rigid, artificial limits of private property institutions, which constrain social mobility and interfere with traditional agricultural practices based on the rotation of cultivation sites. According to Guarani-Kaiowa traditions, the space required for a family needs to be constantly regenerated and reconfigured through movement in the landscape that is essential for the fulfilment of their way of life. Their leaders have repeatedly emphasised that their long-term, non-negotiable goal is to reinstate most of the original Guarani-Kaiowa territory instead of the small islands so far granted to them by the state (Barbosa & Mura, 2011). The political crux of the matter is that the land demanded by the Guarani-Kaiowa is legitimately theirs not only because Indigenous populations used to live in these areas (which is the main legal stipulation for the return of ancestral land), but more importantly because the possibility of a meaningful future for them fundamentally depends on their physical and metaphysical interdependencies with this land. The Guarani-Kaiowa geography evolves in different directions and contains multitemporal elements from their past that shape the visible present and the desired future. A crucial part of this geography is the large ‘space in waiting’ that is dreamed about, constantly narrated and re-narrated for younger generations, an anticipation of a concrete future reality that will reinstate the past. This spectral space is associated with the expression *tekohabã*, that means ‘the space to become’ or ‘the space that will be re-established’. It constitutes the spectre of a lost world that nonetheless will be restored one day if they continue to actively envisage it. The distribution of the existing reserves on the map shows this palpable spectre (the vast land in between reserves and encampments), a constant reminder of the perennial defiance and forthcoming action of the Guarani-Kaiowa to recover land that is theirs, as can be seen below:

“My name in Guarani is Apyka Vera Rendy and we are here in our ancestral land, Pueblito Kue. I was born here but when I was 4 or 5, my parents moved to Sessoró, where I grew up, met my wife and got married. (...) We returned to this land in 2009, I am involved in the fight ever since and I never give up, because for me it was so important that we returned to our original places. We know where the cemetery of our ancestors is, our grandfathers, the people who came before us. (...) The farmers destroyed everything, so we could not identify where our people used to live. They don’t want us to have our land, however an Indian knows where it is. We take our land back

because we know that this is the land of our people. I am no longer a child, I am 50, and I will continue to fight, this land of Pueblito is ours. We know the area like the back of my hand. (...) You come to visit us, you see what our situation is like, we don't have plants, we don't have enough cassava, and that's what bothers us, and that's what I'm telling you, that we're not going give up, we will not be discouraged, for this land if the whites want to kill us all, let it kill. If because the farmers kill us all, and stay in our place, but will they be happy? However, it is because of the Indian that the farmers still survive, on the day that the Indians disappear from that land, even the farmers were unable to plant more, do you know why? The farmers depend on the Indians to help, for this reason, farmers regardless of whether they are government, president, they need to think consciously to realise the problems of the Indigenous peoples.”

### **Interrogating the Politicised Production of the Guarani-Kaiowa Space**

The Guarani-Kaiowa, despite their troubles and the abject violence they have experienced, have written one of the most intriguing stories of contemporary, multicultural Brazilian society and its perennial dependence on frontier activity. It is a situation fraught with tensions and hidden complexities. From the perspective of Indigenous groups, frontier making is a process of hyperbolic action that generates its own antipode, as movement in one direction often ultimately leads to opposite results. The Guarani-Kaiowa have had to resist an antagonistic rationality that invariably led to the fragmentation and privatisation of space, promoted and coordinated by the national state. There has been a terrible banalisation of aggression, regular assassinations and most of their ancestral land is still a spectre, which seems to prove that the Guarani-Kaiowa are merely on the losing side of regional development. Their land was grabbed, their social life violently disrupted, their world will never be the same. However, the experience of frontier making endured by the Guarani-Kaiowa demonstrates that Indigenous groups are, in effect, both victims and protagonists. The very presence of Indigenous peoples in the region, after decades of abuse, reveals a remarkable capacity to cope, despite all the difficulties, with the negative impacts of the advancing frontier and suggests that such groups are among the most resilient and skilled of those embroiled in frontier making. It is true that the impacts of colonisation affected the Guarani groups later than the majority of other Indigenous peoples, but it is also the case that their recent history has been marked by extraordinary courage in handling market-based globalisation, the commodification of common resources and the homogenisation of socio-spatial practices.

Indigenous peoples have commonly been portrayed in mainstream Brazilian political debate using normative language which represents them as responsible for their own condition. In this way, their action has been judged against criteria and values that are foreign to them. Many of the subtle elements in their value system are not easy to bring into the realm of westernised academic comprehension, but it is not too difficult to perceive a wealth of sensibilities that help to fill many of the social and ethical gaps of frontier making. The Guarani-Kaiowa have a fundamentally different association with the landscape where their ancestors were buried and still are, given that for them both the living and the dead reside in that land; their life, identity and existence depend on that land, and at the end of their life they become land themselves. Areas beyond the farm fences are remembered, evoked, celebrated and, when the time is ripe, claimed and ultimately recovered. Something that is important to add to conventional interpretations of the mobilisation and reaction of Indigenous peoples their ability to perform intentional actions (despite all the adversity) because of strong references to past situations of the group and the accumulated experiences of dispossession and discrimination. Space-based violence is a major, ongoing reality, not a singular event that happened in the past, that is, the oppression of indigeneity continues to pervade the geographical present (Radcliffe, 2017). Varese (1997), for instance, demonstrates the long-term process of attachment, resistance and mobilisation of Indigenous people in Latin America since colonial times. In that context, the political agency of Indigenous groups does not only include the intentionality to take action and it cannot be simply reduced to logical reasons and conscious intentions (Enç, 2003), as it is a socio-spatial construction in relation to the world that was dramatically changed and continues to the dreamed about.

It exists a true latent agency that is more than intrinsic (i.e. the power held by social groups to act although detached from other forms of instrumental and collective agency, cf. Yount et al., 2019), but it incorporates the fact that the very existence of Indigenous groups has only been possible because of persistent efforts to resist aggression collectively. It can be therefore claimed that to abolish the political (space) is to eliminate the Indigenous person (from space). The meaning of latent agency is exactly the ability of Indigenous peoples to retain attachments to places, heritages and socio-ecological practices, to develop survival mechanisms based on their ethnic identities and to take the initiative to advance their cause whenever and however the opportunities arise. What is more, the ontological condition of Indigenous groups in the contemporary world is largely predicated on the predisposition to mobilise forces collectively. As brilliantly formulated by Albert Camus (1951, p. 38), “*je me révolte, donc nous sommes.*” Resistance and reaction are integral elements of latent agency, which is not merely about

concealing action, but being prepared to act, in spite of power imbalances and accumulated injustices. Such agency is not only latent and collectively triggered, but deeply inserted in processes of spatial change. Because of their peculiar territorialised trajectory – typically involving the violent displacement of families and communities with strong attachments to places, which are intensively lived and that constitute extensions of their own humanity, resulting in the conversion into refugees or pariahs in their original territories – Indigenous peoples display a latent geographical agency, that is, a nexus of potentialities in which the groups strive to survive and to take the initiative and reconstruct some elements of the past, which was lost but remains a constant presence in the daily social life.

The recognition of such latent geographical agency unveils the tripartite ontological arrangement described by Deleuze (1968) at the intersection of the interdependent ‘registers’: virtual, intense and actual. According to Deleuze, intensive morphogenetic processes follow virtual multiplicities to produce localised, actual realities with extensive properties. Unlike how it is normally described, the political power of the Guarani-Kaiowa is maintained independently of their immediate control of the territory, but it is accumulated as latent geographic agency that is eventually manifested in the *retomadas*. The virtual is actualised by way of intensive processes. Because of their geographical agency, the Guarani-Kaiowa have managed not only to recuperate their religious traditions, but to mobilise these in support of their social identity, political voice and spatial strategies. Their search for a better life is informed by the symbolism of a mythic land of peace and plenty, which is translated into sources of hope that help them in the difficult journey back to the lost areas (Chamorro, 2010). Notwithstanding all the profound changes and influences that have affected the Guarani, their most cherished religious and existential creeds continue to underpin social values and interpersonal relations. According to Clastres (1975), the search for the new world has carried on for centuries through physical movement in the South American territory, led by powerful spiritual leaders to overcome existing circumstances and socio-political crises. In this sense, the religiosity that infuses Guarani cosmology operates as a refuge and has left them prepared to cope with contemporary economic frontiers. Against all the odds, the Guarani-Kaiowa have revealed deep persistence and wisdom in using their ancient religious beliefs to help them deal with 21st century challenges.

The theological thinking of the Guarani-Kaiowa corresponds to a particular time-space conceptualisation of the world, where deities enter households and establish relationships (Mura, 2006). The main locus of geographical agency is the interface between the extended family (with around 100 individuals) and the larger Indigenous network that connects different reserves and settlements. The basic spatial unit is the *tekoha*, the specific area where one or a few extended

families live, strongly connected with other *tekobas* through regular meetings, marriages and ceremonies. A *tekoba* has no rigid limits, but comprises the space needed to hunt and fish, is broadly delimited by hills and rivers, and often includes a river basin (Benites, 2014). According to the Guarani-Kaiowa tradition, when there is a disagreement or need for more resources, part of the group moves to another area and establishes a new *tekoba* (Silva, 2007). Therefore, spatial mobility [*guata*, which means wandering around, walking or perambulation] is an important pillar of Guarani-Kaiowa society and their way of life (Brand, 1998). The movement associated with *guata* suggests a constant willingness to be free to resettle elsewhere in order to maintain the livelihood of the family and to guarantee social reproduction. Through *guata* there is also contact with the *tekobas* lost to economic development and a perennial longing for return to such areas that still show marks of Indigenous activity decades ago (burial grounds, old settlements, cultivation plots, etc.).

According to Guarani religiosity, these lost areas remain populated by gods and invisible entities, some benign, some evil, so people have to prepare themselves spiritually before they can return. The radicalism of Indigenous spatial action (incomprehensible for the rest of society and apparently illogical, considering the level of killing and suffering they have experienced) is guided and anchored by the invisible world of their ancestors and the dream of a land that will restore the desired connections between the gods, the dead and the present generations. The latent geographical agency – a true geography of potentialities – is directly and powerfully fuelled by the extraordinary emphasis on eschatology in the Guarani world, that is, their social life may be relatively simple but the taxonomy of the supernatural world is complex and this spiritual dimension has an active, intense presence in quotidian, material life (Viveiros de Castro, 1986). Several scholars who have studied the Guarani have recorded the pre-eminence of religion over all social spheres and, more significantly, the practice of religion as a decisive locus of resistance. The use of their own language, impenetrable to most outsiders, also works as a secret war code that helps to preserve their identity and enforce the meaning of their objects, actions and traditions. New generations are more proud of being Indigenous, which is an important legacy of the last four decades of mobilisation and dialogue with allied non-Indigenous groups. It was even possible to detect a sudden increase in the construction or reconstruction of prayer houses [*opy*] in several communities, suggesting that the Guarani-Kaiowa are creating spaces for social and religious interaction to reaffirm their identity and somehow respond to mounting pressures and renewed violence post-2019 (see Figure 3 for an example). Clastres (1975) and several other authors have demonstrated the crucial role of religion in the rationalisation of dramatic socio-spatial changes that have affected the Guarani; their religious beliefs are centred around the

messianic expectation of the ‘land without evil’ that will eventually replace the imperfect, mundane reality of the lived world (although this myth has been questioned as a decontextualized academic fabrication, see Villar & Combès, 2013). Their cosmology is also informed by the apocalyptic vision of the end of the world, which is now often associated with the inferno of monoculture farms (Morais, 2017).



Figure 3: Invitation for the Inauguration of a Prayer House in 2020 in the *retomada* Laranjeira Ñanderu (Rio Brillhante municipality)

Considering the *retomadas* as main driver of space production in the region, Benites (2014) provides a vivid description of the violence historically experienced by the Guarani-Kaiowa, but also their sophisticated preparation, making use of social and religious heritages as an integrating and transformative force. The aim of the *retomada* is to restore the lost *tekoha guassu*, which is the territory shared by several extended families and following influential religious and political leaders. It is possible to ascertain from the narrative offered by Benites – himself a Guarani-Kaiowa anthropologist and researcher – the crucial political and existential connection between families and their leadership revealed in the dialectics *tekoha – tekoha guassu*. The strategies of land reoccupation are intensely discussed and enacted in the large assemblies [*aty guassu*] organised by the Guarani-Kaiowa since 1979, in which religious rituals are of paramount importance. Participants identify mutual needs, share tactics, make collective decisions, and prepare documents for public dissemination. The passionate ritualization of their practices and the importance of religion for their political action encourage them to fight. This is a moment of great risk, a real war, but it is more than a holy war against the invaders: it is a

necessary struggle to maintain their world. During the *aty guassu* the core assault group is selected, formed from religious people, their assistants, political chiefs, elders and children. This vanguard party spend months preparing themselves for the attack, praying and taking part in strenuous rituals. The four nights before the *retomada* is a time of even more intense religiosity, when the warriors are baptised, which is required in order for them to be recognised and accepted by the dead ancestors and to be protected against evil spirits and invisible beings. The night before, they paint their faces and parts of the body with *urucum* (a plant used to make red body paint) and the males hold their bows and arrows tightly as a sign of respect for the ancestors. After this long preparation, they march for around ten kilometres during the night to collectively retake the land. If everything goes as planned, they immediately build huts and start to fish and hunt to feed the group. A new altar for the continuation of religious ceremonies is also erected. Using tactics like this, in recent years the Guarani-Kaiowa have managed to recover more than 20 areas, although the farmers who claim ownership of the land have reacted in different ways, frequently through the use of brutal violence.

### **Conclusions: A Long-term Ethnopolitical Situation**

The previous pages have examined how the straightforward image of modernity and innovation that underpins contemporary development frontiers needs to be replaced with a much more complex picture. Frontier making, which has been a central politico-spatial driving force of capitalist development, remains a highly paradoxical phenomenon, in which progress and abundance are repeatedly promised, while the reality on the ground continues to be shaped by the old practices of exploitation, exclusion and racism. The landscape of the frontier seems simultaneously logical, organised and chaotic, out of place. In the case of Mato Grosso do Sul, agribusiness appears novel, but in fact it recreates elements of the colonial past, particularly in the context of violence against local Indigenous groups. The Guarani-Kaiowa, among other peoples, are commonly depicted as living examples of stone-age savages (for example, when individuals are seen wandering around the city, begging for food or asking for money), although their geographical practices demonstrate a sophisticated ability to comprehend and creatively react to socio-spatial pressures and economic changes.

It is a complex socio-spatial situation fraught with puzzles and ambiguities; to a large extent, it is the Guarani-Kaiowa who are offering innovation, while agribusiness encompasses inbuilt obsolescence. Agribusiness seems new, but it mobilises and is justified through practices introduced in colonial times, while Indigenous people are historically old, but their reactions,

creativity and aspirations are closely connected with contemporary debates on alternatives to development and market-based globalisation. All this is happening in a highly politicised landscape where Indigenous groups, despite all the tragedy, suffering, humiliation and severe neglect by the state, are in effect securing small, but precious, territorial victories. To the surprise of some urban and business groups, the Guarani-Kaiowa have shown latent geographical agency shaped by religious practices, strong family ties and the ability to internally negotiate the return to their original areas. Far from any sentimental romanticism, we can learn that for the last forty years many communities have been able to regain confidence, mobilise their language, knowledge and religion, and form strong networks between families and localities to both resist the trend of violence and, when opportunities arise, retake their long lost land.

Different Indigenous groups will have diverse levels of association with the westernised model of economic development, but their socio-spatial experience represents a challenge to the prospects of frontier making and reveals its ingrained contradictions in terms of socio-ecological violence, social exclusion and inequalities. Contrasting with the narrow rationality of agribusiness farmers and their political allies, the cosmovision of the Guarani-Kaiowa encapsulates multiple layers in which the material and spiritual terrains converge in a way that allows them not only to labour in the areas currently occupied, but also to almost touch the spectral space that will be returned to them one day. The land of their ancestors belongs to the living descendants and the return to those areas depends, fundamentally, on the initiative and courage of present generations. Because Guarani-Kaiowa land has essentially only qualitative value, which is absolute, perpetual and beyond monetisation, the logical attitude is to continue the struggle to the last drop of blood. From their perspective, they are witnessing a 'territorial pulse', that is, their lands are only temporarily lost and are there to be reconquered; the Guarani-Kaiowa never gave up their land; they could not, because it is part of their existence to be returned to the ancestral land. There are many lessons to be learned here, in particular the talent to absorb the increasing and dissimulated brutality of frontier making and, at the same time, voice their political demands, form solid strategic alliances and coordinate land-recovery initiatives.

It is the case that the affirmation of Indigenous identities and the pursuit of long-pending rights are relatively recent phenomena in Brazil and other South American countries, directly associated with the progressive strengthening of democratic reforms. In that context, the resistance and agency of Indigenous groups, who are increasingly trying to restore valued elements lost to national development, are crucial components of a wider mobilisation for social and environmental justice. Finally, the present analysis should help to endorse the growing importance of Indigenous geography in the early 21st century, a period characterised by



sustained attacks on many of the important social and political achievements of the last two centuries (such as universal equality, rejection of racism and discrimination, basic human rights, etc.). The territorial and agrarian struggle of the Guarani-Kaiowa constitutes an emblematic chapter of a geographical mobilisation in the Global South of the planet, which challenges the conventional, Westernised narrative of modernity or post-modernity (Ioris, 2018c). The survival and expansion of groups like the Guarani-Kaiowa actually represent an ‘inconvenient’ reminder that other worlds are possible and, quite conceivably, necessary.

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