


Chapter 11

Settler Colonialism and the Capricious Seizure of Unwanted Land, or How the Huni Kuin were Expelled From Plácido de Castro, Acre, Brazil

Marcello Messina

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8822-3342>

Federal University of Paraíba, Brazil

Jairo de Araújo Souza

Federal University of Acre, Brazil

ABSTRACT

Situated in the Mesoregion of the Acre River, Plácido de Castro is a small municipality in the Brazilian state of Acre. In 2015, with the consent of the authorities, a group of people of Huni Kuin ethnicity occupied an abandoned, state-owned piece of land in the municipal territory, namely, the Parque Ecológico. For two years, the Huni Kuin group has lived in the Parque Ecológico, decontaminating and revalorising the land. Afterwards the Huni Kuin have been gradually dispossessed of the occupied land via various coercive actions, some of which were backed by the authorities. In this paper, the authors draw upon media releases as well as an interview with Hunk Kuin cacique Mapu, in order to signify the events in terms of a violent performance of settler colonialism in the face of the legitimate reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty over Brazilian land. In particular, they look at the ways in which political authorities, police forces, social services, and the broader non-Indigenous society unanimously cooperate towards the total effacement of Indigenous bodies, communities, and subjectivities from the land.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3729-9.ch011

INTRODUCTION

With the capital Rio Branco, Acre is the westernmost state of the Federative Republic of Brazil. The state is proverbially characterized as the most remote territory within Brazilian national space, to the point of being the butt of a popular joke spread on social media, which purports “Acre doesn’t exist” (Lucena & Barros, 2014). However distant from metropolitan Brazil, Acre is in fact extremely close to Bolivia and Peru, and is part of a tri-border region with the neighboring departments of Pando, in Bolivia, and Madre de Dios, in Peru¹. Neglected and scorned in national popular culture, the state of Acre as part of Brazil is, as a matter of fact, the product of more or less conflictual negotiations with the two neighboring countries.

In particular, the chapter authors refer to the bellicose circumstances by which Brazil conquered a vast portion of land, previously belonging to Bolivia, in the Acre River Valley. Established by the 1903 Treaty of Petrópolis, this arrangement was actually the product of a violent war between the two countries, which eventually saw the victory of the Brazilian side, led by José Plácido de Castro. Glorified as “Acrean Revolution” within the Brazilian side, the conflict is remembered as “war” and “holocaust” by the Bolivians (Silva et al., 2017; Souza & Messina 2018). Plácido de Castro is also the name of the small Acrean town where the facts analyzed in this chapter took place. Many of the names of Acrean municipalities are direct references to the settler colonial heroes who facilitated the annexation of the region to Brazil. The state capital Rio Branco, for example, is named after José Paranhos, Baron of Rio Branco, the then Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who coordinated the last phases of the conflict with Bolivia between December 1902 and March 1903 (Tambs, 1996, pp. 271-272).

Bearing the name of one of the proud conquerors of Acre’s own *Brazilianness*, the town of Plácido de Castro lies right at the border with Bolivia, being separated from Puerto Evo Morales by the river Abunã. In this geopolitical arrangement, Plácido de Castro emerges as a staunch bastion of Brazilian-ness that evokes settler colonial fantasies from its very name. Border narratives involve Bolivia and its Indigenous and settler colonial inhabitants as Acre’s and Brazil’s *Other*, to be scrutinized, marginalized, criminalized, and kept at a distance. These experiences need to be considered as a backdrop to the other fundamental conflict that inscribes the region, which involves the violent effacement of local Indigenous peoples, territories, and cultures from the sovereign horizon of the three colonial countries that occupy the region. In the state of Acre specifically, this is reflected in a tendency to ignore the trajectories of Indigenous population and their contribution to the present-day social, cultural and political configuration of the state (Albuquerque, 2015).

More in general, in western and northern Brazil, the chapter authors observe a tendency to conflate the “foreigner” and the “*indio*”, both seen as comparable menaces against national sovereignty, and both a priori assigned to a space that exists beyond the boundaries of the national territory. As claimed by Cavalcante (2013) with regards to the situation in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul,

there is the attempt, by some sections of Brazilian society, to create an unsupported opposition between the ethnic identity of Indigenous people and their nationality. [...] For this reason, attempts are often made to characterize the Guarani as Paraguayans, which supposedly would represent them as opportunists who migrated to Brazil to illegitimately access the social and territorial rights guaranteed by Brazilian law, which would be allegedly more advantageous than those offered to the Guarani Indigenous people in Paraguay (p. 134)²

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