

# Indigenous people in urban context and identity: an artistic collaboration with the Wapichana

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## Abstract

This paper is intended to reflect upon the concept of identity on the perspective of urban indigenous. Besides, it aims to present an artistic artwork resulting from the interaction between the author and the members of Wapichana (a Brazilian indigenous community living in Brasília), this artwork boosted the discussions regarding identity. The researcher participated in a few protests and in religious manifestations organized by the indigenous people in defense of their land. After that, it was accomplished an artistic intervention aimed to produce a video-art piece. The goal of this work was to put in evidence different voices belonging to the same indigenous community, so mixing tradition and modernity and, consequently, distinct views of similar issues. This performative action had the intention to contribute to diminish the prejudice against indigenous groups that live in Brasília and to provide visibility for some of their issues. In this sense, the action here described participates in the gamut of artistic interventions asking for social and political change.

**Keywords:** urban indigenous; identity; Wapichana ethnicity; indigenous video-art; indigenous rap.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Brasília, capital of Brazil, is well known for its architecture designed by Oscar Niemeyer. However, just a few people might know that among the modern buildings and wide avenues there is an indigenous<sup>2</sup> reserve of inestimable value (cultural, religious, ecological, biological, and economic) called *Santuário dos Pajés* (Shrine of Shamans). Indigenous of the Fulni-ô,

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written with resources from the Notice DPI/DPG No. 02/2021 of the University of Brasília. My sincere thanks to the colleagues of these deaneries.

<sup>2</sup> I will adopt the definition of indigenous in the sense of “originating”. Thus, indigenous people means people originating from a geographical region in the period prior to the invasion and colonization that took place in their territory. This dictionary--like meaning is also found in the writings and lectures of the indians Daniel Munduruku (see link at the end of this article) and Luciano Baniwa (2006, p.27). Just to shorten the writing, the word indian is used, once in a while, as synonym of indigenous person.

Cariri Xocó and Wapichana ethnic groups have lived in this area since before the construction of Brasília, that was inaugurated in April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1960. There are no historical primary sources about the native peoples of this region that came to constitute the Federal District. However, it is understood that:

the indigenous occupation of the site began in 1957, when indigenous people of the Fulni-ô ethnic group, from Águas Belas-PE, traveled to Brasília to work as workers in the construction of the capital and took refuge in the woods of the cerrado to dedicate themselves to sacred worship and ancestral religious manifestations<sup>3</sup>

Due to real estate speculation leveraged by powerful construction companies, associated with corrupt government officials and judges, this indigenous reserve is in danger of becoming concrete. Judicial disputes have been fought since at least 2008, when the federal government declared itself as the owner of this land and sold it to construction companies to build a new residential neighbourhood called *Setor Noroeste* (Northwest Sector). Nevertheless, the indigenous people contest the validity of the land ownership by the government, as they have a 1980 document proving that they bought 4 bushels (about 112.000 square meters) of land and, thus, they are the legal owners of the area where the reserve is located. Figure 1 shows that a huge part of this area is already completely taken by buildings, remaining a small green part where some tribes are still living. In favour of the indigenous, the federal prosecutor Felipe Fritz Braga, one of the few who understand the preservation of the *Santuário dos Pajés* is crucial to ensure the Fulni-ô Tapuya's surviving in the area, claims the existence of “an anthropological report used in an [old] suit [where one can] found evidence that indigenous tribes have been living in the area since 1956, during the construction process of Brasília<sup>4</sup>”. In this case, the very existence of several lawsuits throughout the years works as evidence of the land ownership by the indigenous.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://mapadeconflitos.ensp.fiocruz.br/conflito/df-indigenas-lutam-por-permanencia-e-recognition-de-santuario-e-territorio-tradicional/#sintese>. This site (in Portuguese) presents important information about the conflicts waged by the indigenous populations to guarantee the possession of their lands in several states of Brazil. It also presents a history of the appropriation process of the Santuário dos Pajés, which is being analyzed here, as well as documentary sources (journalistic, legal and academic) about this territorial dispute.

<sup>4</sup> Report published in February 13, 2018 by the online newspaper Voice of America (VOA). Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/americas/land-fight-simmers-over-brasilias-shrine-shamans>.



Figure 1: Northwest Sector in Brasília (Brazil). A small green upper left) still remain among the buildings that dominate the former indigenous reserve.

The population of Brasília, when called upon to speak out on the subject ends up forgetting the legal aspects and giving their opinion based on prejudice. For example, one of the most common reiterated phrases is that the indigenous people who live in this reserve are no longer true indigenous, since they live in an urban area with all the amenities of the white culture, such as cars, cell phones, computers, televisions, etc. Therefore, they are subjected to government determinations (even if these adjudications are not fair). The indigenous, for their part, understand that although they live in a metropolitan site, they have not lost their ethnic roots, consequently, they are legal heirs of the land. This opposition posits an interesting problem regarding one's identity. Who decides if an indigenous living in urban area is (or no longer is) an indigenous? The justice, the white population or the own indigenous?

The expropriation of indigenous lands is not a new issue in Brazil or even in other countries. However, the increase in invasions of indigenous lands, deforestation and ethnocides in various parts of Brazil is evident since Jair Bolsonaro assumed the presidency<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> To mention at least one source to support this assertion, see satellite photos showing the record devastation of the Amazon rainforest caused by illegal mining with the collusion of the federal government (news published and accessed on September 30, 2021): [https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02644-x?utm\\_source=Nature+Briefing&utm\\_campaign=bfba6d0862-briefing-dy-20211001&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_c9dfd39373-bfba6d0862-46675706](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02644-x?utm_source=Nature+Briefing&utm_campaign=bfba6d0862-briefing-dy-20211001&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c9dfd39373-bfba6d0862-46675706)

Since the first Portuguese arrived in the country, indigenous lands were taken and considered as State property. In addition, there are a huge amount of non-indigenous people named landless whose lands were invaded by rich individual or companies. These landless people in general live in settlements and face similar problems to the indigenous, since all of them are fighting for this very basic human right that is the right to a piece of land where they can work and ensure their survival. The mention of this contact point between indigenous and landless peoples regarding disputes of both groups against the government will be retake ahead when consider the concepts of transculturation and acculturation, since both involve power relations.

Alongside the question of land ownership, whether due to absence of sites for cultivation or the lack of other fundamental citizens' rights, such as health and education, some indigenous people were forced to live in the cities. This changing has provoked, in medium run and mainly for the younger generations, a crisis of ethnic identity.

Concerned with this serious problem of the misappropriation of indigenous lands in Brazil, in the following I intend to reflect on the ways indigenous have found to not only making the people aware, but also to sensitize them towards their problems. The concepts of acculturation and transculturation (Ortiz, 2002) are used as a basis to reflect about the transformation occurred with urbanized indigenous or those indigenous pushed to live in urban areas. Indigenous people living in the city have easy access to health and education systems, and many of them graduate and occupy the same jobs as whites. Nevertheless, they remain victims of prejudice and discrimination. The situation is complex, as it involves questions of identity, citizenship and occupation of public space. This condition was righteously explained by Carolyn Stephens: "while urbanization can provide major opportunities for indigenous well-being and organization, the city can also be a challenging, alienating and frightening experience, particularly for migrants, threatening their identity in the process" (2015, p.55). Stephens uses Michael Dodson words to remind us that "removed from the land, we are literally removed from ourselves." (idem, p.55).

Having in mind the complexity of the situation so far described, In the following I will consider some aspects regarding this subject to provide a better ground for comprehending an artistic intervention resulting of an interaction accomplished with some members of the indigenous community who live in the *Santuário dos Pajés*. Instead of a research-action or a traditional ethnography, the aim of this cooperation was to provide them with an opportunity to express themselves artistically. We understand that through art, other senses can be boosted, and people can be moved aesthetically. I'd like to add that this text is one of the results of a broader project that comprises a series of actions to enable interaction between researchers and indigenous communities in an urban context.

## Indigenous people in an urban context and the notion of identity

As we read researches and news about violence and prejudice suffered by indigenous communities in Brazil, we may not realize how similar this situation is when compared to other countries, even the most developed ones. Elizabeth Fast and collaborators, for example, described the prejudices suffered by indigenous people in Canada and the similarity with the Brazilian context is so explicit that, when reading her text, a question pops up to our mind: is the author commenting on Brazilian indigenous people?

There are several challenges to be faced by indigenous peoples in an urban context, as shown by several testimonies from the indigenous people themselves (for example, Baniwa, 2006; Daniel Munduruku, Ailton Krenak, Márcia Kambeba and Marcos Terena<sup>6</sup>), in addition to reports from governmental and non-governmental institutions. The Red de Investigaciones Sobre Indigenas Urbanos (RISIU), for example, accompanied several of these institutions and associations (among others, the Associations O Brasil é Minha Aldeia; Arte Fulni-ô; Arte Nativa, Aldeia Maracanã, SOS Pankararu) in the realization of a far-reaching research aimed at evaluating the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on indigenous peoples in urban contexts in Brazil. Among the results collected and sent to the WHO, it was found that indigenous people living in cities are discriminated, mainly because they are not considered “authentic” indians and, therefore, they are made invisible and often excluded from public policies aimed at indigenous people.

This invisibility does not contemplate the countless factors that motivated the displacement of these peoples to the urban context. 1) expulsion from the territories; 2) growth of urban areas and the consequent approximation with indigenous villages; 3) search for better living conditions, such as work, formal education, health, etc. among others (RISIU, 2020).

It is paradoxical that most people claim that indigenous people living in cities are no longer indigenous. Nobody would say, for example, that a Brazilian who moved abroad or a foreigner who moved to Brazil lost their respective nationalities. In addition, there is a great diversity of indigenous peoples and the use of the term “indian” ends up homogenizing it. It would be the same as using “Asian” with the intention of determining an intrinsic quality to a whole genetic and cultural diversity. What the diverse Brazilian indigenous ethnic groups have in common with each other (as well as “Asians” or “Europeans”) is, above all, matter of a geographic order, that is, the fact that they inhabit a delimited region of the Earth. However, the geographic boundary does not determine identity. As Baniwa explains (2006, p.27):

Among indigenous peoples, there are some more accepted self-definition criteria, although they are not unique or excluding:

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<sup>6</sup> The links to these testimonials are provided at the end of the article.

- Historical continuity with pre-colonial societies.
- Close connection with the territory.
- Well-defined social, economic and political systems.
- Language, culture and defined beliefs.
- Identifying yourself as different from the national society.
- Linking or articulating with the global network of indigenous peoples<sup>7</sup>.

The simplistic understanding that the use of technologies or other apparatus typical of white society constitutes a criterion for determining someone's identity must be defied. A white person will not become an indian if he builds a canoe with techniques learned from the indians. Likewise, an indian will not cease to belong to his ethnicity if he watches TV or uses a mobile telephone. Researchers Roberta Herter da Silva and Norberto Kuhn Júnior analyzed the use of smartphones by the Mhyá-Guarani indigenous community. Similarly, they contest the claims that the mere use of technological resources (such as cell phones, computers and internet access) constitutes a sign of assimilation and loss of cultural identity. The authors argue that these statements presuppose the idea of an indigenous tribe that is distant and totally detached from the global context. However, this understanding, according to them, is surpassed because “the concept of community is no longer restricted to the physical territory and to the communicative practice carried out within a limited geographic space” (Silva & Kuhn, 2017, p.236). We live in a world with diverse possibilities of communication and the only reason for the exclusion of any community from this wide connection network is prejudice.

The same type of discrimination and invisibility committed to indigenous people in urban contexts occurs in other countries, such as Israel, Laos, New Zealand, and Australia (see: Stephens, 2015, p.56). It has passed 13 years since the signature of The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and it seems that little has changed. This agreement was signed by a majority of 144 states. Canada voted against the Declaration, however, later on (alongside with the other three countries which also had voted against: Australia, New Zealand and the United States) “reversed its position and now supports the Declaration”<sup>8</sup>. This Declaration was fully supported by Brazil, and it is meaningful because the indigenous affairs were then considered as “rights”, that is, they have to be provided by the State. There are three points in particular on the UNDRIP that deserve being highlighted<sup>9</sup>:

1. The Declaration confirms the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination and recognizes the right to subsistence and the right to land, territories and resources.

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<sup>7</sup> I share the author's understanding when he explains that: “when we are talking about indigenous identity, we are not saying that there is actually a generic indigenous identity, we are talking about a symbolic political identity that articulates, makes visible and accentuates de facto ethnic identities, that is, , those that are specific, such as the Baniwa, the Guarani, the Terena, the Yanomami identity, and so on” (Baniwa, 2006, p.40).

<sup>8</sup> Information available at United Nations website: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org) accessed March 3, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Text in Portuguese available at: [https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/Q&A\\_Declaracao.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/Q&A_Declaracao.pdf). Accessed March 3, 2020.

2. The Declaration confirms the obligation of States to consult with indigenous peoples before adopting and applying legislative and administrative measures that affect them, in order to obtain their prior, free and informed consent.

3. The Declaration condemns discrimination against indigenous peoples, promotes their effective and full participation in all matters related to them, as well as the right to maintain their cultural identity and to make their own decisions regarding their ways of living and developing.

Regarding these three topics of UN Declaration, one can observe that in Brazil the first point is well established and observed in several legal circumstances, as such for the enrolment at universities or public services as applicant for racial quotas<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the other two items are still away of becoming a habitual practice.

It is possible to consider these last two topics within a broader perspective when considering the Canadian circumstance. Fast et al. (2017) argue in defense of cultural safety, a sociological model for considering the unbalanced power relations existing between indigenous and non-indigenous people in view of the residues of colonialism (still prevailing in contemporary societies and largely responsible for prejudice) and the governmental actions of inclusion and service provision (health, education, etc.) for indigenous communities. The authors claim, “cultural safety calls for a transformative change in the (education, health, justice, etc.) system that begins with the recognition of the colonial violence and its continuous impacts today” (2017, p.153).

Transporting the idea of cultural safety to Brazilian milieu, one can note how endangered is the indigenous cultural complex. Firstly, it is worth noting the stereotype of “generic indigenous” remaining since colonial times that ingrained in people’s mind an image of “a person who does not work, does not study, therefore indolent, primitive, a person who did not evolve or progress, prefers living in the past, naked, according to nature, and with no sense of ownership” (Chaves & Ronco, 2012, p.87). This misconception implies that the vast ethnic and cultural plurality of indigenous populations is reduced to a simplistic and mistaken idea of indigenous identity. Therefore, this situation leads to cultural insecurity, since mainly the urban indigenous people are often reluctant to admit themselves as such, thus attempting to avoid the prejudice that this ethnic identification entails. Similar understanding regarding this deliberate denial or concealment of indigenous identity is also called to attention by Fast et al., who observe “there is a direct link between cultural safety and Indigenous identity formation, and how the latter was (and continues to be) impacted by colonial violence” (2017, p.153), also remembering that “there is no ‘urban Indigenous person’ specific profile” (idem, p.154).

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<sup>10</sup> There is a sad episode in which the right to enter the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul (UFMS) through the quota system was denied to a Ticuna indigenous woman due to the institution's simple bureaucracy. However, the University was sued and the law-court decided in favor of the indigenous woman. About the case, see the article available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2LMMyaEzzc>.

Moreover, because some indigenous were forced to live in cities, the issue of ethnic identity became manifest. The most recent survey (IBGE, 2010)<sup>11</sup> showed the indigenous population in Brazil is 817.963 inhabitants. From this amount, city-dwelling indigenous corresponds to 315,180 people<sup>12</sup>. Especially in the case of second and third generations of indigenous city-dwellers, the geographic distance from their traditional lands, associated with the cultural detachment from their roots caused by urban life, leads to the feeling of loss of ethnic identity. This is observed in the data provided by IBGE, showing that a substantial part of urban indigenous is not naturally associated with a specific ethnic group. Even when urban indigenous manifest their indigeneity<sup>13</sup>, they are not able to identify their ethnic origin. With this phenomenon, “an indigenous identity emerges and is experienced. However, this identity is no longer based on the idea of belonging to a specific indigenous ethnicity, but on the feeling of belonging to an indigenous ‘race’” (Chaves & Ronco, 2012, p.90). To consider this phenomenon, Baniwa (2006, p.28) proposed the idea of “ethnogenesis” or “re-ethnization”. According to Baniwa, the new generations of indigenous people whose ancestors had been expelled from their land and who, as a survival strategy, ended up hiding or denying their identity and cultural belonging, are reinstating and recreating their indigenous traditions.

The Canadian case is a good example of some unexpected unfolding caused by pushing indigenous to urban centers. Montreal is the Canadian city with the largest population of first generation urban indigenous. However, in reason of lasting effect of Indian Act (created in 1800) “which defines who is “Indian” and who is not” (Fast et al., 2017, p.153), “a large number of Indigenous peoples who reside in cities are not eligible for Indian status” (idem, p.154). The problem arises in reason of the criteria adopted by Canadian government to decide about indigeneity, since “legal definitions rely on genealogy and marriage and ignore questions of culture, ethnicity, personal values, and community definitions of who is Indigenous” (Fast, 2017, p.153). The denning of indigenous legal status is a serious problem because prevent non-legal indians to participate in some policies destined to indians. Thus, “individuals who identified as Indigenous but were not registered as “Indian” under the Indian Act did not have access to the same programs, policies, and services as other “Status Indians” (Indigenous and

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<sup>11</sup> IBGE stands for The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. IBGE is the main provider of data and information about the country. “Its mission: identifying and analyzing territory, counting the population, tracing the evolution of the economy as a reflex of people’s employment, production, and pointing out, as well, how people live.” Text available at: <https://www.ibge.gov.br/en/institutional/the-ibge.html>

<sup>12</sup> Data and statistics about Brazilian indigenous population available at: <https://indigenas.ibge.gov.br/graficos-e-tabelas-2.html>. Accessed: March 3, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> To the goals of this text, I will follow Tlakatekatl (2014) *indigeneity* definition: “the state or quality inherent to an indigenous group—or individual, that exemplifies their position as an original people who inhabit and were born, or produced naturally, in a given land or region, including their descendants and relations thereof.”

Northern Affairs Canada, 2016, apud, Fast, 2017, p.153). Consequently, all these difficulties regarding identity drive urban indigenous to an estate of cultural unsafety.

I finalize this section with a quotation of Stephens that holds the merit of sum up the hitherto commented problems.

Urban indigenous identity is perhaps the most important but also most complex of the challenges of the urban indigenous experience, as it is linked to the very concept of indigeneity. Many elements of self-identification of indigeneity become more complex and fluid in urban areas, however, including aspects such as the occupation of communal lands, links to ancestral territories and the preservation of traditional cultural practices. These aspects can be particularly challenging in cities as indigenous community members may feel unwilling to self-identify in order to 'fit in', particularly among indigenous youth. As a result, urban indigenous populations may become officially invisible if they prefer not to self-identify due to stigma and marginalization within the dominant urban society. (STEPHENS, 2015, p.55)

Seeking for ways to avoid the aforementioned invisibility of indigenous people, in the follow I describe the actions carried out with the Wapichana community at *Santuário dos Pajés* (Brasília, Brazil).

### **Artistic interventions as safeguard of indigenous culture**

If, on the one hand, the colonists' disrespect and violence against indigenous communities did not lead to the almost total ethnocide of these peoples; on the other hand, it helped to forge stereotypes and instill prejudices that regrettably persist to the present. Unfortunately, the indigenous struggle for the demarcation of their lands is far from over. Nevertheless, some sectors of society have promoted joint actions with indigenous communities in order to maintain and reinforce ethnic identity, preserve their traditional culture, raising awareness of the population about the "indigenous problem" and, thus, reducing prejudice. Below I will mention some of these actions, however, it is worth a parenthesis.

It must be made clear that the expression "indigenous problem" refers to the survival of indigenous peoples and, therefore, as the anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro (2017) has explained, it is a problem that does not exist in itself, but arose initially from the contact between indigenous and colonizers and spread out to the orb of broad white society. Thus, the "indigenous problem" is not a consequence of the existence of the indigenous; otherwise, it arises out of the conflicting, disrespectful and, sometimes, illegal relationship imposed by the white man.

Several individual and institutional initiatives aim to collaborate to solve the so-called "indigenous problem". Non-Governmental Organizations, for example, have dedicated to preserve indigenous traditions in the form of books, CDs, and DVDs. NGO *Thydêwá*, winner

of several awards and project funding grants, works directly with indigenous communities<sup>14</sup> in order to produce material to be made available at Internet. Among the series of projects carried out, one of the most innovative is *AEI – Arte Eletrônica Indígena* (Indigenous Electronic Art), which aims to teach indigenous people how to use digital resources and technologies. The NGO provides the indigenous with artistic residences where they can take part in workshops run by invited artists and instructors. In this way, the indigenous learn to use digital tools so that they are able to express themselves artistically. The creations of the indigenous people are available on the *Thydêwá* website and can be freely used by the general public as material for further creative proposals, since the indigenous creations are “open to remix, hybridization, and fusions. In addition to the artistic, the production generated may relate to science and technology, so retro-leveraging all fields<sup>15</sup>.”

*Ikore* is another NGO that has developed several projects intended to the preservation of indigenous intangible heritage. The narratives of myths and legends so important for the transmission of knowledge among the indigenous people were published in books and also made available as audio files at *Ikore* website. One of the initiatives that received grants from government institutions was the project *Histories of Tradition*, which aims “registering, documenting, and disseminating indigenous cultures in order to strengthen their identity and get closer to Brazilian society. Creating a collection, using technology and new supports, to preserve the art of oral narratives, the memory of traditional narrators, and to ensure that this heritage is available for communities to use it in the construction of other educational and cultural materials<sup>16</sup>.”

The aid received from non-governmental organizations can be analyzed in two ways. On the one hand, the benefits brought to the indigenous communities by these actions are notorious, especially with regard to the protection of their intangible heritage. On the other hand, the number of NGOs involved shows that the Brazilian government is delegating its functions to these institutions, that is, the government is relieving itself of its responsibilities in protecting these communities and, consequently, the environment where they live.

Researchers have also analyzed similar initiatives accomplished in other countries. Carcamo-Huechante and Legnani (2010) reflect on how indigenous from Argentina, Chile and Nigeria have created and broadcasted a radio program not only “to maintain their home languages”, but also “to open up opportunities to re-create their traditional culture under circumstances of modern pressures”.

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<sup>14</sup> Among these communities we can name: Pankararu, Tacaratu, PE; Karirí-Xocó, Porto Real do Colégio, AL; Tupinambás, Maringa, PR; Pataxó de Barra Velha, Porto Seguro, BA.

<sup>15</sup> Information provided by *Thydêwá*, available at: <http://aei.art.br/sobre-o-projeto/>.

<sup>16</sup> Information provided by *Ikore*, available at: <http://historiasdatradicao.org/o-projeto/>.

In Canada, a research network based at Concordia University designed the Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC). The concerns are similar to other initiatives around the world, that is, to build a better future for indigenous communities. With this purpose, AbTeC runs *Initiative for Indigenous Futures* (IIF) by promoting workshops, residencies, symposia, and archive. The *Skins Workshops on Aboriginal Storytelling in Digital Media*, for instance, “teach Indigenous youth how to adapt stories from their community into experimental digital media, such as video games”<sup>17</sup>. In this sense, the indigenous learn how to create video games intended to preserve their traditions, language, stories and culture in general. Analyzing this project, Thea Pitman comments, “this is not only important in terms of ensuring the passing on of Indigenous knowledge and cosmovisions (worldviews), from generation to generation, but also in terms of contributing to the envisioning of possible futures for the whole of humanity” (Pitman, 2019, p.190). She understands that Indigenous science-fiction is essential to break the so common pattern nowadays observed in commercial video games, that “tend to rerun colonialist first-person-shooter scenarios, thus delivering only the unimaginative futures conjured up by those who hanker after the glories of conquests past.” (*idem*).

Another intrinsic aspect of digital technology to be considered is the series of actions promoted by different private institutions with the aim of giving indigenous people access to digital platforms and, thus, also giving visibility to their cause. One of these programs was organized by “Instituto Itaú Cultural” and has the title of Indigenous Cultures. Broadcast on the institute's YouTube channel, Indigenous Cultures provides videos produced with Indians who talk about various aspects related to their culture, as well as problems that affect the entire planet, such as environmental and ecological issues and the problems discussed in this article.

These examples of interventions promoted both by private institutions and by non-governmental organizations highlight the importance of digital media as a resource for making visible and mobilizing actors and the indigenous cause itself. In this sense, the strength of the image that allows it to be widely and easily accessed on platforms and social networks has the power to sensitize the public and unite them in favor of an ideology.

Having in mind the problem presented at the beginning of this text, I will present an artistic intervention accomplished with the indigenous community living in the region that is exactly the focus of discord: *Santuário dos Pajés*.

### **An artistic collaboration with the Wapichana**

The first step was engaging with the indigenous just aiming to understand how do they feel about this conflicting situation. Engaging here is used in the sense that I did not ask for anything (for instance, interviews, recordings, etc.). It was not an ethnology or an

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<sup>17</sup> Available at: <http://skins.abtec.org>. Accessed March 4, 2020.

ethnomusicological research. The approach, or methodology (if this a proper word in this context), was the dialog. I talked to them describing what I do at the university and asked if they want to be part of it. I invited some indigenous to come to the classes at the university, as “students” and also as teachers, opening space for them to talk about their traditions and how the youth sees themselves nowadays. As the University of Brasília has several indigenous students, as well as other projects developed in collaboration with the indigenous communities of Brasília and surrounding areas (projects promoted mainly by the Center for Multicultural Coexistence of Indigenous Peoples – Maloca-UnB – and by the Department of Anthropology), the university has become a place of reception and political reflection for these people, which facilitates the proposition of different actions and interventions. Parallel, it was offered to them workshops in video production (recording, editing, etc.) that they could use later on as they wish. In addition, I also participated along with indigenous from other parts of Brazil in a few protests occurred in Brasília (see ahead) and in religious ceremonies organized by the indigenous people living in *Santuário dos Pajés*.

After these initial engagements, it was accomplished an artistic intervention aimed to produce a work of art. The goal of this initiative was to put in evidence different voices uttered within the same indigenous community, so mixing tradition and modernity and, consequently, showing distinct perspectives of a similar issue: the protection of their land. During this artistic interaction, a complex network of other themes and problems appeared, thus revealing the plurality of everyday situations experienced by indigenous living in such urban area like Brasília. With this socially engaged performative action, we also hoped to collaborate to raise society's awareness to the complexity of indigenous cause. To this end, a video-art piece titled *Terra Cy'ndida*<sup>18</sup> was produced with the intention of precisely showcasing the intricacy of this context experienced by indigenous communities living in metropolitan areas. The material for this artwork consisted of video recordings at the *Santuário dos Pajés* revealing its exuberant nature, besides footage of protests carried out by several indigenous communities on the esplanade of the ministries in Brasília, during the *Acampamento Terra Livre – ATL* (Free Land Camp), April 2019, (Figures 2 and 3). ATL is the main and largest assembly of Indigenous leaders coming from the five regions of Brazil. The ATL has been happening for 15 years in a peaceful way, aiming to give visibility to the Indigenous fight for their constitutional rights<sup>19</sup>. The footage and photos were shown to the indigenous people who chose which ones they would like to be used in the final version of the work.

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<sup>18</sup> Available at: [http://antenor.mus.br/?page\\_id=85](http://antenor.mus.br/?page_id=85).

<sup>19</sup> Available at: <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/guardians-of-the-amazon-protect-indigenous-peoples-rights/>.



Figure 2: *Acampamento Terra Livre* (Free Land Camp). Several indigenous communities camped in front of Brazilian National Congress, April 2019 (photo Erik Schnabel)



Figure 3: during ATL, indigenous protesting in front of Brazilian National Congress, April 2019 (photo Erik Schnabel)

The indigenous rapper Ian Wapichana (Figure 4), born in *Santuário dos Pajés*, participated in the video declaiming a poetry of his own. In another stratum, an older indian

plays a traditional melody on one of the ritual flutes (Figure 5). In this way, some layers of meanings are constructed, resulting in an artistic action that highlights the clashes undertaken by Brazilian indigenous peoples who need the demarcation of their lands, the components of indigenous tradition, and elements of modernity associated with urban indigenous peoples. Even though *Terra Cy'ndida* is a collaborative work of art, all the material (images, music and sounds) presented in the video were chosen by the indigenous.

It is interesting the fact Ian Wapichana calls himself as rapper. It has been increasingly common the emergence of rap groups formed by urban indigenous. This form of music expression characteristic of Hip-Hop culture, historically, was chosen as the voice of outcaste minorities, in general those who live in ghettos or were displaced to outskirts of cities. Perhaps, given the critical content of their lyrics, rap ended up calling the attention of the young indigenous people who also found in it a current way of protesting. Nowadays, it is well known the use of hip hop by indigenous people and other minorities in Latin America as whole<sup>20</sup>.



Figure 4: indigenous rapper Ian Wapichana. Still of *Terra Cy'ndida*

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<sup>20</sup> To an overview about the self-identified indigenous rap groups in Latin America see Nascimento, 2014.



Figure 5: Old indigenous plays a traditional ritual flute. Still of *Terra Cy'ndida*

The choice of hip hop by Latin American indigenous may seem contradictory, since it takes over an American genre and submit, so to speak, to yet another form of dominant cultural imperialism. However, the appropriation of this genre and "of elements of Hip Hop culture has become a medium through which new spaces of counter-hegemonic utterances are created, against historical racial marginalization, denouncing the living conditions of indigenous peoples in the contemporary periphery of the modern/colonial world-system" (NASCIMENTO, 2014, p.94).

In Brazil there are several indigenous rap groups that have already reached international projection, such as Brô MC's, Oz Guarani, as well as solo artists such as the rapper Katú Mirim<sup>21</sup>. It should be noted that in addition to the appropriation of this North American genre, the indigenous also maintain the same fashion style (clothes, caps, sneakers, etc.) along with other characteristics of American rappers such as hand gestures, way of singing, and dance. Some of them criticize the fact that a few people expect indigenous rappers to dress like "authentic indigenous", that is, with thongs made from feathers or leaves. However, indigenous rappers often make use of the characteristic feather headdress called "cocar", like the type used by Ian Wapichana, Figure 4.

<sup>21</sup> There are several videos available online featuring indigenous rappers, such as: Katú Mirim: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4czt2327vA>; BRÔ MC's: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBafJIZxT6s>; Oz Guarani: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXlpDa28HQU>.

Considering the growing of RAP groups in Canada, Liz Przybylski (2015) makes an interesting case analysing this phenomenon as a sort of cultural survivance strategy. Przybylski recalls that from the beginning, Hip Hop culture had a particular and well defined socio-cultural and geographic context, that is, the discriminated black people pushed to live in NY ghettos. Nowadays, indigenous rappers and DJ's from other countries that use this musical genre "are now re-purposing hip hop-derived styles to once again express cultural particularity; they perform their own kinds of Indigenous musical expressions within contemporary cities, thus bringing the movement full circle." (PRZYBYLSKI, 2015: 25).

The Brazilian indigenous rappers are their own producers and create low budget video clips to be uploaded and make available online. It is evident the digital media has been a powerful tool allowing these groups to be known, so spreading out indigenous general concerns by reaching a bigger public willing to collaborate with the indigenous cause. For this reason, the initiatives such as the mentioned *Thydêwá* and *AbTeC* are really important since the knowledge and use of digital tools is not so common among Brazilian indigenous people. This contingency provokes us to reflect upon the ideas of acculturation and transculturation.

The Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the concept of transculturation that, in his mind, more accurately described the relationships between (Cuban) indigenous and colonizers. Ortiz aimed to replace the idea of acculturation that holds "a unidirectional character: the individuals of the dominated culture adapt, that is, they are acculturated, incorporating elements of the dominant culture. In Ortiz's vision, the concept of transculturation was necessary to incorporate the multidirectional nature of cultural affairs" (Pérez-Brignoli, 2017, p.98). In Brazil, the initial contact between indigenous people and Portuguese was very conflicting and characterized as a clash between these two cultures. Because of this, the anthropologist Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, although aware of the forced acculturation to which the indigenous people were subjected, suggested to use the expression "inter-ethnic friction" (OLIVEIRA, 1981, p.25) to depict the relationship between indigenous and colonizers. In this regard, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro explains that:

If Darcy Ribeiro politicized acculturation, Cardoso de Oliveira sociologized it, making use of an eclectic palette of references, from Marxism to ethnohistory, from structuralism to phenomenology. Later, he would migrate from the problematic of 'friction' to that of 'identity', and then to that of 'ethnicity' – in a path repeated by several of his pupils-, without abandoning the general issue of interethnic contact (VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1999, p.125).

Since Ortiz, transculturation has been understood as a process where two cultures are engaged in interactions and, consequently, both are transformed or adapted. Malinowski, in his Preface to Ortiz's book (1940), presented the concept in this terms:

Transculturation [...] is a process in which both parts of the equation are modified. A process in which a new reality emerges, compound and complex [...] To describe such a process the term of Latin roots *transculturation* provides a word that does not contain the implication that one particular culture have to tend towards another, but a transition between two cultures, both active, both providing with individual contributions, and both cooperating to the advent of a new reality of civilization (ORTIZ, 1973, pp.7-8).

Dealing with both concepts, it is important to have in mind that a comprehensive definition of culture implies the idea of coherence. As asserted Pérez-Brignoli, when discussing about transculturation it is necessary to perceive that “in each culture there was a stable core, defined by specific and identity traits (2017, p.102).

In the Brazilian circumstance, history books consider that there was indeed transculturation in the first contacts between indigenous and whites<sup>22</sup>. This understanding is due, perhaps, because the Portuguese came to assimilate certain characteristics of indigenous culture, such as the use of herbs and roots as medicine, techniques for building boats, bow, arrow, houses, ways of hunting and fishing, and delivery method learned from indigenous midwives (see: Gerlic, 2011, p.7). On the other hand, it is obvious the cultural imposition of Portuguese culture towards indigenous, such as language, religion, slavery work, to mention just a few. But the most violent part of this "transculturation" was precisely the expropriation of their lands and, therefore, of fauna, flora, rivers, and mineral wealth. This shows that whether transculturation or acculturation, cultural contacts are built over power relations, since the stronger side always imposes more and the weaker loses more.

This situation is similar to what happens with Brazilian Landless Workers (movement named as MST). MST is a movement organized in 1979 with the aim of demanding the government to designate non-productive lands to landless people who wishes to have a site for living and working with agriculture and husbandry, that means, the main MST goal is to demand agrarian reform. This cause is very similar to indigenous, since both groups were kicked out the lands where they lived. Nowadays, it is estimated 41% of the lands in Brazil belongs to 1% (companies or latifundium owners), and the great part of these lands is not used for anything<sup>23</sup>. Of course, the companies or latifundium owners do not wish to deliver their lands to landless workers. Therefore, this conflict has to be decided judicially. However, the land owners are very rich and have established strong lobby groups in Brazilian Congress, that so far, in the majority of times, determined against the landless and indigenous people. In this way, it is clear the settled power relation, since the dispute is not decided under legal or fair basis, but upon power relations. In the midst of this scenario, the various forms of artistic

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<sup>22</sup> A critical analysis of how indigenous peoples are treated in history books, with an emphasis on textbooks, can be found in: SILVA & AMORIM, 2016; SILVEIRA, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Info about MST and the mentioned statistics available at: <https://www.mstbrazil.org/content/history-mst>.

expression appear as a form of cultural survival, resistance and combat against these injustices.

## Concluding Remarks

Even admitting the existence of a small transculturation in the initial contact between Brazilian aboriginal and Portuguese (which begun in 1500), the case of the urban indigenous is different. At first glance, we are led to think that the urban indigenous was acculturated, as there was no change or adaptation in both cultures in this process. The city white culture remained the same and the urban indigenous were forced to disconnect from their traditions and their way of life in order to live on according to regulations of the white people, that is, adopting the model of life based on work and payment of taxes for the government. Therefore, urbanization was one of many forms imposed by the government to keep indigenous departed from their culture and eventually erase their identity.

However, we can think that transculturation may be taking on a new face. If in the beginning there was a forced imposition on the indigenous people, now they deliberately choose to use elements of white culture. On the one hand, indigenous people are being instructed and making use of digital technologies, such as online radio, creating videos for streaming, video games, among others. In this way, they manage to bring their traditions, stories, knowledge, way of life, and problems to the attention of a larger audience. On the other hand, non-indigenous people have access to what is being created by indigenous people and, thus, becoming aware of their problems and often end up taking on ecological issues and environmental sustainability. Moreover, non-indigenous are getting in contact with missing topics in school curricula, such as indigenous myths and legends. Thus, the indigenous traditional oral process for knowledge transmission is also learned, as is the case with mythological narratives that carry on the indigenous heritage while instructing on various aspects of life.

As a result of this current context, transculturation is in fact established as a two-way street, not restricted to the mere use of herbs or traditional culinary recipes from the natives by whites. In the situation described about urban indigenous people, indigenous acquire and make use of contemporary technologies. Non-indigenous, for their turn, become aware of the indigenous cause and gain awareness of how it is possible to live in harmony with nature, taking advantage of the resources it offers without destroying it.

This condition seems to confirm Pérez-Brignoli statement: "In the globalized world that prevails at the end of the twentieth century, everything is hybridization and miscegenation, so it is confirmed once again that there is no cultural purity, beyond a purely ideological essentialism, and that in human life everything is based on connections" (2017, p.102).

Unfortunately, transculturation is not the single aspect to be taken into account in the current contingency. The life situation of urban indigenous people in Brazil is rather similar to Australians' Aboriginal, as so clearly depicted by Stephens:

Aboriginal Australians have a long and unhappy experience of urbanization – forcibly taken from their lands at the time of the notorious policies of assimilation, Aboriginal Australians have experienced the worst of all aspects of urbanization: from the mid-nineteenth century they were isolated from their culture and traditions, introduced to alcohol and drugs, and not given access to decent jobs or education. (2015, p.57)

Should be observed that there are evidences gathered from experiences in several countries suggesting that a critical way to improve life for urban indigenous peoples is through initiatives to support and sustain their identity. And, I think this is the case of the instances commented before, and it is also especially true in the joint artistic action accomplished in partnership with the *Wapichana*. Further, the appropriation of hip hop by the indigenous people provides a ground to consider both: transculturation and identity.

It can be observed in the adoption of rap by Latin American indigenous people that this does not occur in a naive way neither merely to render tribute to a musical genre from a colonizer country. Otherwise, it is done critically, as a way to raise awareness of pressing social issues and with the intention of affirming identity. Transculturation is exemplified in the phrase of Danko Mariman, a Chilean mapuche member of *Kolectivo We Newen*: “we believe that the current Mapuche culture is the Mapuche culture of the 21st century, in which Mapuche use vehicles, appliances, computers, machines, tools brought from Europe, etc. In view of this, the “Mapuche Hip Hop would be just another tool in favor of the Mapuche struggle” (Mariman, apud Nascimento, 2014, p.109). As a form of resistance and identity affirmation, the use of the original native language is perceived in indigenous rap, as well as the use of musical instruments typical of different indigenous cultures.

The loss of identity, as already mentioned, is most felt among urban indigenous, and the removal of indigenous people from their original territories, forcing them to live in the context of cities, ends up accelerating the loss of ethnic ties, as explained by Przybylski:

In the United States, urbanization was proposed as one in a long series of strategies to assimilate Native Americans. Bringing individuals of diverse tribal backgrounds into cities and away from strong family bonds, it was assumed, would slow and eventually stop the elements of cultural learning and teaching that were keeping the cultures of North American Native Nations alive and distinct from those of non-Indigenous Americans (PRZYBYLSKI, 2015: 5).

In light of this observation, the indigenous people's predilection for rap is understandable. Nascimento (2014), for instance, recalls that indigenous communities have been silenced throughout history. Silence, in turn, creates subjugation as it hierarchizes a culture "with voice" over another voiceless. Rap then emerges as a way to combat the silencing power imposed

by the dominant culture, becoming a way of coping and, consequently, a strategy to raise awareness among the youth indigenous. This is done trying to reverse the subordination imposed on indigenous peoples. In this sense, rap is the tactic adopted by excluded communities to be heard. “If the subordinate’s condition is silence, then utterance is the subversion of subservience” (Nascimento, 2014, p.114).

Given that Rap becomes *locus* of enunciation of the excluded communities, it is not surprising that common themes are found in their lyrics. Stand out among these similarities: the frequent discrimination suffered on daily basis, the acknowledgement of the condition of marginality imposed on indigenous people, the fact of being relegated to the peripheries and having to live with violence and criminality. Another aspect that is always stressed by indigenous rappers is the emphasis on the ancestry of their race and, therefore, their right to life.

Another possible and interesting comparison would be between Latin America and USA rappers considering the subject of money. By and large, American rap has lyrics that deal with money as object of desire or as “the” solution to problems<sup>24</sup>. Indigenous rappers, in general, treat the issue as the cause of the destruction of nature, understanding that exchanging the Earth for an unconscious greedy profit is not a good deal and only brings destruction. As an example of this particularity regarding money, it is remarkable the almost identic lyrics from two so geographically distant rappers: Ian Wapichana and Samian. Brazilian indigenous rapper Ian Wapichana improvised a rap for the piece *Terra Cy’ndida* here under consideration. One of his iterated phrases is “One day they will realize that money is not for eating<sup>25</sup>”. The Canadian rapper Samian is a member of the Abitibiwinni First Nation (since he is son of Quebecois father with Algonquin mother). In his song *Plan Nord*, Samian repeats in the chorus: “But one day you will understand that money cannot be eaten<sup>26</sup>”.

In the case of the work of art developed in collaboration with the indigenous people living in *Santuário dos Pagés*, one can observe equal similarities as the above mentioned. The choice the indigenous made for showing case their actual situation reflects the same worries than the other Latin American indigenous people, such as respect and veneration for their traditions, race ancestry, struggle for land, besides the urgent concern with the destruction of nature.

The title of the work “Terra Cy’ndida” is a fusion of indigenous and Portuguese words, pointing directly to the problem of scission between groups that want to own the land. “Cy” is a Tupi word meaning “mother”. The term “cindida” means divided, and was chosen because depicts the political conflict about division and territorial delimitations of indigenous reserves,

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<sup>24</sup> On this topic, it is interesting the list of 10 rap songs about money commented by Daniel Isenberg in the blog Pitchfork: <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/10-great-rap-songs-about-money/>.

<sup>25</sup> From the original in Portuguese: “Um dia vão perceber que dinheiro não se come”.

<sup>26</sup> From the original in French: “Mais un jour vous comprendrez que l'argent ne se mange pas”. The striking similarity between these two raps was brought to my attention by the researcher Liz Przybylski, to whom I am very grateful.

that is, the struggle for the Mother-Earth. It is worth making it clear that *Terra Cy'ndida*<sup>27</sup> is not a documentary about the *Santuário dos Pajés*, but an audio-visual work of an artistic nature in which different layers of images and audios, chosen jointly by the participants, converge to construct plural meanings. In this sense, I like to think this artistic intervention falls within what Martin Nakata (2007) titled as *cultural interface*, that means, the space, the intersection, between systems of knowledge. Thus, the artistic work pinpoints the cross-roads between the cultural elements of distinct socio-cultural groups living in the same environment.

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