

Luiz's invitation: travels through the southern brazilian plateau

O convite de Luiz: viagens no planalto sul brasileiro

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Resumo:

A contribuição emerge de trabalho etnográfico interdisciplinar conduzido de 2011 a 2018 nos Campos de Cima da Serra, região meridional do Brasil. A narrativa da poética agrária dos “campos de fundo” (expressão êmica) é uma das que resultaram da ‘escuta a sério’ (nosso destaque) dos seus moradores campesinos, inscrevendo-se nas possibilidades decoloniais de pesquisa na área das ciências sociais aplicadas. Por intermédio do método escolhido, em que registros audiovisuais (fotografia, vídeo e som) foram colaborativamente constituindo texto misto e inter-relacionado, colocando-se em relevo o conhecimento adquirido pelos relatos, tornou-se possível a emergência desta história na qual uma trajetória de emancipação do pouco conhecido passado escravista desta região é salientada na sua paisagem. Além desse incisivo resultado, com nosso fundamental parceiro Luiz Antônio Wolf de Ataíde buscamos desnaturalizar os convencionais modos de produção acadêmica e seus modos de apresentação.

Palavras-chave: Pensamento de Fronteira. Etnografia Visual. Paisagem Racializada.

Abstract:

This contribution has emerged from the interdisciplinary ethnographic work conducted from 2011 to 2018 in the Campos de Cima da Serra of southern Brazil. The narrative of the agrarian poetics of the “back fields” (emic expression) is one of those that have resulted from the campesinos inhabitants ‘seriously listening’ (our highlight), which lends itself to the decolonial possibilities of research in the area of applied social sciences. Applying the chosen method, in which audiovisual records (photography, video and sound) come to collaboratively constitute a mixed and interrelated text, highlighting the knowledge acquired through the reports. This pathway has enabled the emergence of this history in which a path of emancipation from this region’s little-known slave-owning past is highlighted in its landscape. In addition to this incisive result, with our fundamental partner Luiz Antônio Wolf de Ataíde, we seek to denaturalize the conventional modes of academic production and their modes of presentation.

Keywords: Border Thinking. Visual Ethnography. Racialized Landscape.

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Denaturalizing texts

The relationships among landscapes, spatial racialization, and environmental degradation warrant more rigorous and systematic investigation than has thus far been undertaken in Brazil. In the United States, tensions between landscape and Blackness have received increasing scholarly attention, particularly within urban studies (Pulido, 2000; Wright, 2021). In Brazil, although research on environmental justice has expanded, especially in relation to Quilombola communities (Dias, 2020; Rangel, 2016; Silva & Sousa, 2021), the inscription of racial violence within the landscape remains comparatively underexplored. This academic production seeks to address this gap by directing attention to contexts beyond Quilombola communities, examining how rural landscapes have been constituted through tasks, in the sense proposed by Ingold (1993), performed by a substantial yet historically effaced Black presence.

Our critical perspective emerges from the South American margins, aligned with the decoloniality advanced by Walsh (2005: 16; 2012: 11), as being the necessary protagonism of historically specific experiences in the construction of knowledge within a place marked by colonial legacies. This orientation is central to the present analysis, which reconstructs the slaveholding process through an emic perspective grounded in the interpretive lens of the inhabitants of the landscape under study.

The narrative reconstruction undertaken here seeks to take this account seriously by foregrounding emancipatory practices, understood in line with the interpretations of Walter Dignolo and Arturo Escobar: that providing a genuinely symmetrical engagement among different forms of knowledge enables the emergence of disruptive paradigms alongside modes of thought rooted in the margins and reflective of ecumenal diversity and specificity, often absent from dominant currents of modern scientific discourse (Escobar, 2005; Dignolo, 2003: 21–23). In an effort to move beyond what Augustin Berque characterizes as the modern-classical Western paradigm, this research adopts methodological procedures aligned with what he classifies as an ascientific

attitude.: distrusting the Cartesian rational ‘I’ — one that presumes existence through thought alone, independent of any place or material conditions (Berque, 2014: 10, 18, 91, 149).

In our opening footnotes — none of which are superfluous — we set out, simultaneously, our assumptions regarding regionalization, the academic constructs that ground this study, and an alternative mode of writing. The latter responds to an authorial unease situated within a broader disquiet concerning the role of the sciences, including the humanities, within the wider project of modernity.

Between 2011 and 2018, a pathway of ethnographic research was lived in the southern portion of the Southern Brazilian Plateau¹ and in the physiographic region of Campos de Cima da Serra. Through participant observation, the research followed the tasks making up the daily routines of campesinos in the area. Adopting a cross-disciplinary perspective, the investigation seeks to understand the landscape of the place by capturing the historically situated particular relationships established between the inhabitants and their milieu. Further elaboration on the analytical validity of the concept of landscape, as well as its associated theoretical implications, can be found in Ribeiro (2021), Ribeiro, Anjos, and Radomsky (2015), and Ribeiro, Dal Forno, and Miguel (2015)². The systematization of visual and sound records produced during field encounters — comprising photographs, videos, and audio materials — enabled the collaborative development, together with those specific local inhabitants, of the feature film *Desejos em Paisagens Serranas* (Desires in Serranos Landscapes). This audiovisual work constitutes a fundamental component of the doctoral research from which this paper derives. The thesis integrates both written and visual ethnographic materials: alongside the written text, which details the methodological procedures employed, the visual ethnography functions as an additional textual strategy, incorporating critical reflections on the study process and the necessary authorizations that informed its development (Ribeiro, 2018)³.

In its deliberate construction, this publication reaffirms the need to weave an assemblage of writings, sounds, and images as a means of engaging the knowledge that

¹ From the myriads of discussions about Brazilian regionalization over time, we adopt the choice of Kuplin and Martin (2009).

² Master and doctoral degrees in Rural Development, with respective support from CNPq and CAPES research grants (including a sandwich period in France, according to process no. 88887.116952/2016-00).

³ This contribution arises from a chapter of the thesis. The following link internally contains the access to the video 2(English), that is the film subtitled in English: <https://lume.ufrgs.br/handle/10183/186133>.

Ingold (2000: 16) terms the “ecology of life”: a domain that exists independently of its multiple contexts of instantiation and resists articulation through authorized textual forms⁴. This article contributes to an emerging body of Black studies scholarship that foregrounds the interrelations among landscape, racial segregation, displacement, and spatial confinement (Wright, 2021). In the context examined here, the sparse distribution and demographic isolation of individuals on farms — under work conditions analogous to slavery — effectively obliterate the place of those thus enslaved, while simultaneously excluding Black presence from the region’s historical narrative. This process produces a dual form of obscurity: through physical displacement and erasure⁵.

The most important introduction

There are, as participants themselves emphasize, no boundaries delimiting the devotional paths dedicated to the worship of the Divine Holy Spirit of Vila Seca, a condition simply and directly explained by the assertion that the Divine has no territory⁶. Accordingly, the group of merrymakers responsible for conducting this annual event, held between February and May, travel far and wide to fulfil requests for visits from the Divine’s banner. These visits serve as invitations to the festivities honouring the patron saint, constituting a significant seasonal undertaking that extends

⁴ Double quotation marks are used for direct quotations. Emphasis from the cited authors is indicated in each instance, while our own emphasis is indicated by single quotation marks. Non-English words are italicised.

⁵ Teixeira (2008) provides a historical account of the presence and lived experiences of enslaved populations in the region of Campos de Cima da Serra, particularly in relation to escape routes and sites of refuge connecting the plateau to the coastal areas across the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. Although their research did not directly document the destruction of Black communities within this landscape, such processes are strongly suspected. Possamai and Rizzon (1987: 49, 64–65) argue that the presence of enslaved Black labour was integral in the cases of Portuguese landowners and their immediate descendants. This claim is supported by oral testimonies they collected, by numerous references found in the Measurement and Legitimation Records they examined, and by religious documentation pertaining to the region. Their analysis is further substantiated by the identification of several specific *Posturas* (local ordinances) regulating the enslaved population. References to the activity of *capitães-do-mato* (slave hunters) and to notices of runaway slaves constitute additional, reliable historical evidence, reinforcing what still remains in the landscape itself. These traces persist and are reflected in the empirical field of study by, for instance, in local names such as *Rincão dos Quilombos*, as well as in the emblematic case of *Invernada dos Negros*, close to Lages, which has been extensively examined by Mombelli (2009) and further discussed by Vicenzi and Tafarel (2021).

⁶ The conceptual and operational delimitation of territory comes from Magnaghi (2000: 7), as being a work of art, resulting from the encounter between the human being and his nature, whose personality, character or identity is the landscape of the place – an associative link that Leite (2006a; 2006b; 2011: 82–85) argues is obligatory.

across rural areas surrounding the city of Caxias do Sul⁷. Within the context of a participant observation conducted over a weekend in 2013, one such visit took place at a rural property in the neighbouring district of Cazuya Ferreira, located in the municipality of São Francisco de Paula. Initially referred to as Fazenda do Contrato, it was later clarified that this designation applies not merely to a single property but to a broader locality within the district. The name ‘Contract Farm’ evokes historical cattle-trading agreements that once encompassed extensive tracts of land, which, over time, were progressively subdivided into smaller holdings⁸.

It was the ongoing film production that, in 2016, enabled a return to the 200-hectare farm. This occasion created the conditions for the spontaneous and deliberate involvement of Luiz Antônio Wolf Batista in the research, without which the present account would not have been possible. On the day of the original visit, Seu Luiz, as he is commonly known, had been at home with his family in the metropolitan area of Caxias do Sul, taking a day off from his work. An employee of the farm, he now joined the group for lunch, during which he accompanied the explanation given by the researcher regarding the project and the purpose of the film being shown. As the conversation went back and forth, knowledge of the dances once held in the region was mentioned. At this point, abandoning his previously attentive yet silent posture, Seu Luiz challenged the account offered by the farm’s owner — his employer, with whom he maintained a “formal labour contract” — who had denied “this business of segregated dances”. Calmly and with conviction, Luiz confirmed that, in the past, dances and religious festivities in the region had indeed been organized in segregated spaces for those people identified as white, brown, and yellow. “That’s about forty years ago,” he remarked, as he rose from the kitchen table and left for the short break he takes in the house where he resides during the week, adjacent to the main house, before returning to “the job” — the set of tasks that form his labour.

During the farewell, a little later, his words were notably emphatic: to the extent that this initiative effectively extended the duration and scope of the research. From this event onward⁹, the inquiry came to be guided by the paths indicated by Luiz, thereby the

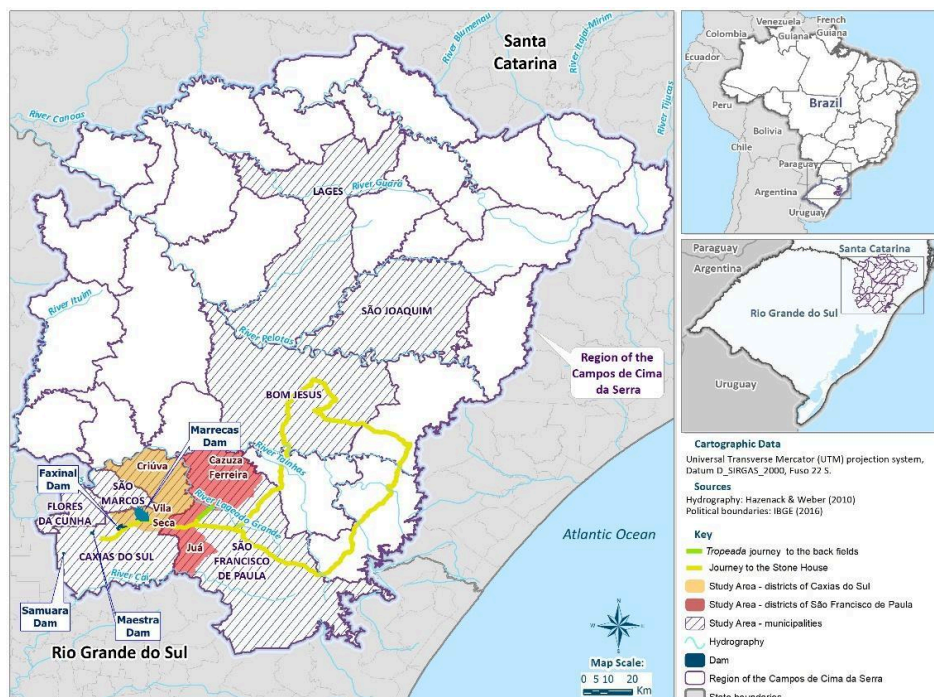
⁷ The details of these journeys – the “wanderings” – undertaken by the merry-makers of Vila Seca through various municipalities of Rio Grande do Sul are described in Ribeiro (2014: 92-99).

⁸ According to the dossier of the movement in favour of annexing the districts of Cazuya Ferreira and Juá to Caxias do Sul, the average size of the properties would be around 80 hectares.

⁹ As a larger event, in all its signified sense – as being of the nature of that place, in its sensitive and constantly moving apprehension, as Whitehead (2006: 52) explains.

*tropeada*¹⁰ to the back fields and the visit to the Stone House thereby definitively shaping the empirical field of study, as illustrated in Map 1.

Map 1 – Location of the Studied Area



Source: authored by Claudia Ribeiro, cartographic elaboration by Silvia Olinda Soares Aurelio.

Thus, very unique opportunities arise in the conversations that began with our encounter: beginning with a ‘see how things were at another time’, thinking. However, with the freedom of ‘the thinking that feels’. This freedom is understood as an opportunity for thought to function in another mode, beyond the historical and geographical circumstances of its emergence on the planet. From this, a diverse poetic license is also constructed in the writing — a poetic making of particular understanding, in an effort of feeling the journeys of the humans, animals and lines that traverse their places of existence. In this case, Ribeiro (2021: 174–175) conceives poetics as a means of enhancing scientific practice, echoing Ingold’s (2000: 25, 110): a sense of the understanding the capacity of making while being an inhabitant connected to place (a world). This perspective closely aligns with the ecumenal trajectory described by Berque (2014: 204) as *poiêsis* — that is, creation, fabrication, and conception.

¹⁰ Translator’s note: Here *Tropeada* refers to a cattle drive. Related words are: *tropa* (raised livestock, mainly cattle, sometimes including with mules and horses) and *tropeiros* (muleteers or drovers).

In this manner, it is with Luiz that we think about the colonial encounter and its *recados*¹¹ and what would be the substance of the back fields and what persists within a stone house located in the hinterlands of the Campos de Cima da Serra. This analysis unfolds through a layered textual interplay with the episode Viagem and the broader episodic trajectory of Nosso Verdadeiro Pasto, drawn from the film Desejos em Paisagens Serranas (Ribeiro, 2018). Despite the seeming invisibility of the presence and contributions of Black people towards the place, narratives such as that of our travelling companion render explicit the processes through which the land has been racially codified, particularly in southern Brazil.

Recados in the colonial (mis)encounter

Shortly after this mutual meeting, and prior even to viewing the film that had motivated the visit, Luiz spontaneously began recounting aspects of the story of his birth in around 1950 in the municipality of Bom Jesus, at a location near the confluence of the Água Branca stream and the Touros River. He noted that his delivery was assisted by a midwife, as this was the only available form of support for childbirth in that time and place. Luiz referred to his mother, Sueli Batista Branco de Camargo (now deceased), in his own words as “brown” and recounted that she was a “slave” during her childhood on one of the large farms in the region surrounding Bom Jesus, where she had been born. According to his account, she had been given away “to be raised,” an arrangement intended by her family to improve her living conditions. She was a daughter from the second marriage of her father, João Batista José, who reportedly had twenty children in each of his unions. He possessed a “small parcel of land” in the municipality, a circumstance that parallels other accounts found during the research in the region. Such narratives emerge within a broader context in which Black slavery is seldom openly discussed. Even in the limited instances where it is acknowledged, there are few recorded cases of formerly enslaved individuals or their descendants having secured land ownership.

¹¹ Recado is a particular term in Portuguese, untranslatable into English – according to José Miguel Wisnik in his analysis of Guimarães Rosa’s work *O recado do morro*, through verbal and gestural means, “the word indicates a circuit in which a message passes from someone to another through someone else,” in complex journeys of obscure meanings in the Brazilian hinterlands. It is distinct from a message (which has a sender and a receiver), as a *recado* emits and receives simultaneously “intended to be sent, it is defined first and foremost and at the same time by having been received,” and “its vocation is to be part of a chain whose beginning and end are not determined.” (Wisnik, 1998: 162).

Luiz further recounts that his mother later married Antônio Wolf de Ataíde, a man from Lages, described as the son of a European immigrant mother — identified alternately as German or Italian in Luiz’s recollection. The couple met while working on the farm of Favorino Borges, where she had come to reside after being rescued by her parents upon discovering her situation on the property of a cousin of that farmer. Antônio arrived there as a seasonal labourer. Luiz refers to this occupation as “careerist” (his father was interested in building a career): “his father ran careers on the farms”. Together with eight other farmhands, the couple lived and laboured for many years on this plot covering approximately 500 hectares, where, in addition to Luiz, they had eleven children. Housing was “given” by the landowner, as were two head of cattle per year for slaughter. The rest of their needs of sustenance, however, was derived from a payment arrangement “à meia” (sharecropping): i.e. they received half of what they produced on belonging to the employer. As Luiz recalls, in the case of the families of workers living on the farm, the men were entitled to a share of agricultural production, while women received some remuneration for washing clothes. In addition, they could, “in the time left over after work”, plant around this dwelling place.

While still a child, Luiz — like his mother before him — was given “to be raised” to another cousin of Favorino. He describes this employer as a “buenacho” boss, someone who, in his view, “really thought a lot of him”. He remained in this arrangement until five years after marrying his wife, Nilza, at which point he began to receive a formal salary. His departure was prompted by disagreements with the new system introduced by the landowner’s son, who assumed control of the farm after his father’s death. Luiz then went on to have the work regime he has had until now — involving weekdays spent in the fields and weekends in the city with his own family. Through what he characterizes as considerable sacrifice — emphasizing that he is “very careful” — Luiz gradually acquired his own properties: first in Bom Jesus and later in Caxias do Sul, where his own residence is located in the urban area. He worked for 29 years at his second place of employment, the so-called “Casa de Pedra” (The Stone House) farm, which he expresses a strong desire to show us. He subsequently held positions on other farms and has, for the past 16 years, been employed at the location where the present encounter took place. Over the course of his working life, Luiz experienced only a brief period of unemployment, approximately two months, during which he received support from his son, who worked in regional vegetable and potato

cultivation. As he notes, the children have contributed greatly to the family's livelihood, both during that period and at other times. Importantly, they were also able to study and now hold jobs in Caxias do Sul.

Following this cascade of revelations, and as we were saying our farewell, there is a moment of astonishment: like a punch, a profound thought comes — precisely in the manner Luiz himself had suggested, about what is to be done exactly with the memories¹² he had so suddenly entrusted to us. But also, thoughts about his mother, as a child sleeping on “a *peleguinho*¹³ on the floor, by the *borralhinho*¹⁴ beneath the stove,” on nights likely as bitterly cold as the day of our encounter. An unexpected tap on the window — shut against the icy wind despite the brightness of the sun — at the end of that day's work in the fields and fieldwork, the window is lowered and smiles exchanged. Luiz insisted that there was much more to be shown. Beyond what could be seen during the *tropeada*, a journey arranged for the following day, as part of his first proposal, he announced a bigger undertaking: a return to one of the farms where he had previously worked, in Bom Jesus. It was at this point that the decision was made to accompany him on subsequent travels through the “back fields,” as these areas are locally known. These are zones situated along the margins of the plateau, near the escarpments carved by the region's major rivers.

Luiz no longer recalls his mother's date of birth, nor does he know her exact age at the time of his own birth. However, if one estimates that she was approximately twenty-five years old when he was born, and that, like him, she had been “given away” at around the age of seven, her experience of enslavement would likely have occurred in the 1930s. Luiz reflects that this condition was relatively brief: upon learning of the circumstances affecting both her and her brother, who had likewise been “lent out,” their family intervened promptly to retrieve the children and return them to their parents.

The dialogues in the film underscore the real challenge of the research: the recovery of memories across diverse family references, including complex kinship

¹² According to Halbwachs (1990), personal memories and their path to reconstruction as collective memory constitute a problematic situation, the solution to which lies in referencing them within the real social frameworks that contextualize them: primarily, by seeking shared experiences with other people, aiming for common contextualization.

¹³ Translators note: *peleguinho* (a diminutive term for sheepskin).

¹⁴ Translators note: *borralhinho* (a diminutive term for the mix of ashes and unburnt material remaining in the fire grate).

relations. In this particular case, the difficulty in reconstructing aspects of Luiz's childhood — while his father was from Lages, there is uncertainty surrounding the nationality of Luiz's paternal grandmother — may, in part, be associated with the shifting territorial configurations of Italy and Germany in the aftermath of the First World War. At the same time, the intuitive progression of what is happening showed that Luiz understood from early on that he has 'knowing' of the precious things of the life of the place — as they were an equally relevant part of his own life experience. It is precisely this awareness that underpins his desire to ensure that these memories are not lost. In a few words, his recollections encapsulate key dimensions of the early phases of colonization in this landscape: initially marked by Azorean or recently established Brazilian *sesmeiros*¹⁵ and later succeeded by other European groups who settled and contributed to the formation of Caxias do Sul and other plateau towns. It is these Europeans who would become the region's first dominant landowning figures (Ribeiro, 2014).

In accepting Luiz's invitation to travel by means of his memories, we also accept his invitation to think about how racial violence inscribes itself in recollections tied to land and to the material forms of human dwelling. In the case in hand, we seek to demonstrate how anti-Black racism operates through a dual process: it erases the material traces of Black families from the landscape while leaving enduring footprints within memory. We travel across time and space, prompting thoughts about how the organisms that we call bovines first came to inhabit these regions. These animals, like many plants and even human beings that were carried as "foreign organisms" to this new world — to a segment of the ecumene — this inhabited portion of the Earth. To say this in another way, from the standpoint of the historical contingency that shaped this shared milieu¹⁶, (but without any obsession with any such reconstitution): it is important to note that cattle were introduced to the Americas by Europeans. Historiographical accounts of this first transatlantic voyage indicate that the so-called 'discovery of America' brought the first cattle to Central America, from where, in a few decades, they expanded, particularly northward. In the context of Brazil, bovines, suitable for the

¹⁵ The term *sesmaria* refers to lands allocated under a legal framework established in Portugal at the end of the 14th century and later adopted in Brazil to regulate colonization practices. The recipient of these lands was known as a *sesmeiro*. (MOTTA, 2005, p. 2)

¹⁶ As Berque (2014: 73) recommends, against the landowning logic of modernity, the aim is to find the trajectory of the Earth predicated as a world. Beyond mechanical necessity or chance, to find "the contingency of common history," which is what cosmically unites beings in a common milieu.

production of meat and milk, were introduced in the 1530s in the Captaincy of São Vicente, likely originating from Cape Verde and, possibly, from the Portuguese region of Trás-os-Montes, during the expedition led by Martim Afonso de Sousa. Similar introductions occurred in the northeastern captaincies of Bahia and Pernambuco during the same period. Large-scale cattle raising in what would later become Brazilian territory thus initially developed in the northeastern and southeastern regions, where it played a crucial role in supplying both traction power and food for the labour force engaged in the emerging sugar economy. With regard to the southern regions, one of the most widely accepted explanations for the introduction of cattle is linked to the Catholic evangelizing missions conducted by Spanish Jesuits in the early decades of the seventeenth century. (Silva, A. F., 2006: 49–52).

This process was driven by the pragmatic motive that the agricultural practices imposed on the indigenous population proved insufficient to sustain all those concentrated within the Jesuit Missions, particularly given the prohibition of hunting and gathering. These animals are thought to have been introduced from Asunción, in Paraguay, which, according to historical reconstructions such as that of Ginja (2009) — drawing on Primo (1992) and Rodero *et al.* (1992) among others — had itself received livestock originating from São Vicente. Comparable interpretations have been advanced for southern Brazil by Sagrilo (2015), which this author encounters principally in earlier foundational studies by Porto (1954), Teschauer (2002), and Assunção (2007). The subsequent trajectory of cattle expansion is closely linked to the vicissitudes of the Jesuit order and the populations inhabiting its eastern missions, particularly in the context of conflicts involving sovereign Iberian powers are the origin of the so-called *vacarias* that took place, in part, in the region that would later become to the present-day state of Rio Grande do Sul. In calculated strategic efforts to safeguard their patrimony of both human and animal populations, large *tropas* (see footnote¹⁰) were undertaken toward areas offering natural protection, reflecting deliberate strategic planning. Within this context, the *Baquería del Mar* was initially established along the coastal plain. Subsequently, in response to increasing threats from both Spanish and Portuguese incursions, the Jesuits opened routes through the forested hinterlands in search of more secure territories. It is estimated that, around 1709, this process led to the emergence of the *Baquería de los Piñares* in the region of Campos de Cima da Serra (Duarte, 1944: 192–193).

A quasi-mythical account of this movement has recently resurfaced in one of the few extant Jesuit correspondences from the period. According to this record, the expedition covered approximately 850 kilometres, departing in 1705 from San Borja de Yí, in present-day Uruguay, heading southward with the objective of rounding up cattle in regions threatened by Portuguese forces based in Colonia del Sacramento. The stated aim was to safeguard the “*tropas* belonging to the peoples of Uruguay” (free translation), while also intending, according to the record, to protect the Indigenous people of the Missions from diseases allegedly associated with contact with French and Black individuals present in a certain locality, as well as from interactions with other autochthonic peoples deemed “infidels” by the missionaries. The narrator describes successive *vacarias* across multiple locations over several days, culminating in a comparison between the *Vacaria do Mar* and the *Vacaria dos Pinhais*. In the former, pastures were reportedly exhausted, whereas the latter — despite its higher altitude and lower temperatures — was regarded as milder. It offered superior water sources, shelter, and grazing conditions, and cattle were more readily located there. According to the account, by the spring of 1705 this action had resulted in the aggregation of approximately 420,000 head of cattle, enabling the replenishment of mission herds and, from the ‘remainder’, the formation of the *Vacaria dos Pinhais* (Gonzalez, 1966; Perdomo, 2012).

It was under such conditions that the White people within this colonial (mis)encounter began to explore this new world. The Jesuits, in undertaking this colossal cattle drive, were responding to the threat of Portuguese incursions — although the primary objective of those incursions was not the seizure of livestock. Rather, expeditions led by the *bandeirantes* from São Paulo do Campo de Piratininga were essentially aimed at the capture and enslavement of Indigenous populations to supply labour for the economic activities in the centre of the country. Historical records attest to the activities of these so-called “slave traders of Piratininga,” with “various incursions into hinterlands of Brazil” possibly dating as early as 1607 or 1614, prior to the five more extensively documented *bandeirantes* that followed. The first of these, known as the Aracambi *bandeira*, set off in 1635 from São Paulo do Campo de Piratininga, traversing the “*Caminho do Mar*” toward the hinterland region referred to as “Patos.” It was led by Fernão de Camargo -- “the *tigre*” and Luiz Dias Leme. In the seventeenth century, the term “Patos” did not denote a specific group of “gentiles” or

even to a type of aquatic birds; rather, it was used to refer to “any southern region towards which the expeditions departed” or “the vague name of an enormous region, to the south of São Paulo, encompassing extensive area of what are now the S (sic) Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul”. Following this initial expedition, five additional incursions were undertaken, culminating in the defeat of the Paulista forces in the Battle of Mbororé in 1641. One of the principal routes used during these early bandeirantes is believed to have passed through the Caamo — a designation that, at the time, referred to the *Campos*¹⁷ of São Francisco de Paula (Jaeger, 1940: 27–28).

In this manner, the Europeans, that is the Portuguese, arrived together with *Paulistas* and *Lagunenses*, at this colder part of the country. This process intensified in the mid-eighteenth century with the distribution of land grants (*sesmarias*). It is crucial to emphasize, however, that the *Campos de Cima da Serra* (see note 18) were not uninhabited. The *Botocudos*, described in historical accounts as fierce adversaries of the *Kaingang* led by their chief General Braga, whose dwellings were located in grasslands and araucaria forests of São Francisco de Paula, Caxias do Sul, and surrounding regions (Ribeiro, 2014).

The type of journey that Luiz organizes and undertakes with his neighbours and fellow workers on the farm today could, in earlier times, have been with a *tropa* composed exclusively of horses or mules. This was so common that it gave rise to a local placename near Criúva, São Jorge da Mulada. This locality was “discovered” in the early eighteenth century during one such journey where the *caminho da tropa* (trail) was recorded near the Lajeado Grande River. Portuguese, that had an agreement with the king, as reported one of the local inhabitants with the longest lasting memories of the arrival of his relatives in the region. Of these first colonizers, the clear memory of the condition of this occupation remains, as being the results of a colonial agreement. He had made “an arrangement with the king, with the government of Portugal, to gain a little part of the contract, a *sesmaria*. Within this arrangement, Black enslavement was a part: “those who came into the mountains — the *colônia* (colony) — were permitted to bring as many enslaved individuals as they deemed necessary to undertake the clearing of forests, an obligation imposed by the Imperial Portuguese administration”. Enslavement is such an integral part of this reminiscence that number of slaves each son

¹⁷ Translators note: *Campos* in this context, refers to grasslands.

of this first landholder inherited is reported as twenty-nine.¹⁸

At the same time as the journey advances, what is learnt from other knowledge acquisition actions cannot be forgotten: from the examination of probate inventories from the region of *Campos de Cima da Serra* in the second half of the seventeenth century, the area appears as an impoverished district within imperial Brazil, although one in which cattle played a central economic role. At the same time, these records point to the significant presence of horses in early regional trade, a pattern that, across the south as a whole, can be traced back to the preceding century (Teixeira, 2008: 43–48). As there was as yet no market for by-products such as hides, tallow, and horns, nor were there effective means for large-scale meat preservation, the herds were often referred to as “the cattle of the Jesuit priests” across the southern grasslands. From the beginning, a certain idea that the existence of these animals was natural becomes established, which blurs the historical contingency that made it possible in the region as a whole. In the first decade of the 19th century, with the emergence of the possibility of preserving meat in *charqueadas* (meat-drying establishments), the exploitation of this ‘natural resource’ became entirely dependent on these enslaved workers (Freitas, 1993: 442; Hamesteir, 2002: 18; 71; 75–76).

The *Serrano* pastoral economy modality, as reflected in the collected accounts, can be reconstructed within the broader framework of the *sesmeiro* agrarian system within this landscape (Ribeiro, 2014: 140–178; Ribeiro, Dal Forno & Miguel, 2015). With the exception of an isolated memory concerning the occasional supply of nearby *charqueadas* in the region of Porto Alegre, most memories preserved by older inhabitants refer to early, small-scale commercial exchanges with Santo Antônio da Patrulha region. These exchanges were subsequently expanded through the development of animal drives to the *Serrana* region adjacent to the high plateau – crossing Bom Jesus, Lages and São Joaquim before arriving at Sorocaba. These activities were conducted by the earliest *sesmeiros* who, along with their descendants, later appear in historical records as ranchers and farmers. They are the first bosses, conducting their business primarily at the expense of the labour provided by black “slaves”, in a form of slavery that would be typical of small landowners, similar to that

¹⁸ Having been born in the 1940s, he knows in detail the history of the “old trunks” – ancestors who arrived in the locality from Portugal, from Ihla Terceira in the Azores and also from Madeira Island (Ribeiro, 2014: 146-149).

found in the vast majority of properties in these more northerly regions, which were dedicated to production destined for the domestic market.¹⁹ Alongside this, there existed the figure of the so-called field hands: free men — often identified by Gomes (1966) as “border Indians” — who operated under arrangements distinct from wage labour. They could ‘even’ establish their own small ranches within the croplands. Croplands, in fact, have always existed, although small, like the one still remaining on the *Fazenda do Contrato*, or the larger ones located on the edges of the plateau, the destination of the *tropeada*. They serve to supplement the animals’ feed during times of pasture scarcity in the grasslands, especially in winter.

The case of the substance in the back fields

The film’s proposal opens the perspective of attunement with Luiz’s condition, when the image of what he explains becomes clear: in his explanation of how knowledge of the alphabet and its workings is denied to him, under the allegation that he did not know what ‘the letter I’ was. Rather than seeking an immediate response, we take seriously the challenge – or the *recado* he posed, and we accept the effort to understand what this means in the context we are examining, to some extent together. Namely, the fact that the very motivation that would justify the act of teaching – the fact that someone does not know what is going to be taught – was, at that time and place, cited as the reason justifying their exclusion from the knowledge system in question.²⁰ This short *tropeada* triggers an echo of a past where the cattle brought by the colonizer became this ‘natural wealth’, exploited to exhaustion, through the extermination or enslavement of the Indigenous population, concurrently with or immediately following African enslavement. This echo that resonates in the present: the history of this colonial encounter in the region of *Campos de Cima da Serra* is marked by enduring conflicting specificities. These are evident not only in the crushing of the autochthone population but also in the later incorporation of labour into a southern mode of production characterized as extractive and precarious, one that the country’s feeds centre of progress – the south is left to one side as noted by Leite (2006a: 128, 129, 133). Luiz

¹⁹ Regarding the enslavement by small landowners in Teixeira (2008: 56); on the ownership of slaves in the captaincy and later Province of São Pedro in Osório (2005; 2016).

²⁰ This idea can be further enriched, and can be found in Alencastro (2014)

underlines this — “things were like that back then”. It follows from his statement that it is indeed necessary to know what was happening at that time. For this, more than science is needed; wisdom is required – understanding the past, but in depth and with a relational disposition towards other times.

The use of enslaved human labour in cattle-raising activities in Rio Grande do Sul has not been firmly established as a consensus within the social sciences, nor does it constitute a long-standing conclusion in the field. As argued by Nogueról *et al.* (2007: 5–6), this situation within an economy historically largely centred on pastoral production has significantly shaped the construction of the respective identity of the geo-political unit — said by such authors to be the case of Rio Grande do Sul, and even of “Southern Brazil”, which ends up having an image constructed as a territory with a profile that is at least attenuated, if not distanced, from slave practices as a whole. This has contributed to the persistence of an idealized image of the South as “another Brazil,” ostensibly unmarked by the enslavement of Black populations — a perception echoed in interpretations such as that of Vitrolles (2011: 13), drawing on Demangeot (1972: 91). This scenario, however, is countered by Nogueról *et al.* (2007), whose historiographical analyses extend beyond Rio Grande do Sul to include neighbouring contexts such as Uruguay and Argentina, as well as the Brazilian states of Santa Catarina and Paraná. Their findings corroborate earlier conclusions by Osório (2005), confirming the presence of enslaved Black labour in *campeira* activities. In doing so, they also contest the notion — advanced in influential works by Celso Furtado (1962) and Caio Prado Júnior (2000) — that slavery was incompatible with extensive cattle and horse breeding. These latter interpretations had posited a distinctive status of the state (including in this southern region of the country), emphasizing its divergence from the plantation-based economies of the nineteenth century, particularly due to the absence of large-scale export-oriented estates reliant on enslaved labour.

The interrelations among violence, Black communities, and the “ecologies of life” (Ingold, 2000), in their regionally specific configurations, constitute a field that still demands scholarly attention in Brazil. The subtle inscription of anti-Black violence in the space — producing racialized landscapes even in contexts where Black families are not numerically prominent, often due to their regional historical erasure — guides the manner in which we follow Luiz’s narrative. Seemingly tranquil and bucolic

landscapes frequently conceal the forms of violence that render them “ecologies of Black life,” that is, those of what Orlando Patterson (1982) conceptualized as Black “social death.” From this perspective, landscapes, particularly those of the southern region of Brazil, should always be scrutinized for their potential for erasure.

We shared this journey until near the time and place where Luiz and his companion would stop for lunch — an itinerary that, in total, would extend over seven to eight hours. Along the time and course, they themselves filmed certain scenes and suggested filming strategies for recording scenes that were finally made, anticipating what they knew was going to happen. Thus, we go until the crossroads leading to *Fazenda Velha* (Old Farm) another, previously and mutually agreed, place of farewell. It is there that one sees, more emphatically than ever before, that the animals already have a good understanding of the path to follow — while the two *tropeiros* pose for the photo, the small *tropa* independently takes the path to its final destination.

As noted earlier, the craft of composing these texts involved a degree of poetic license. At certain moments, the filmic journey exceeds the strictly physical route undertaken — much like this text itself, which moves to other places, while following that path. The slow rhythm of the *tropa* permits a deeper engagement with the spirit of this landscape. In this rural setting — where so-called “back fields” persist and where population rarefaction increases in direct relation to the distance from the urban centre of Caxias do Sul — our thinking struggles to change the impression left by our first exchange with Luiz, a feeling regarding a dominant continuity of the original mechanisms of colonization. Whereas earlier colonisers acted in service of the interests of Iberian empires — here, specifically, the Portuguese — contemporary dynamics reveal new forms of territorial appropriation originating in urban centres. These, too, shape the landscape, albeit through a different type of spirit: one that frames the exploitation of so-called “natural resources” in the name of progress, often invoking the presumed need to ‘redeem’ regions characterized as ‘stagnant’ or backward.

We think, as Luiz himself asked: what kind of “progress” is being invoked in relation to this region? For him, progress was having managed, through great effort, to acquire his house in Caxias do Sul, and to hopefully secure retirement pension after his current employer agreed to formally register his employment. We think ‘feeling’ and we apprehend the substance of this place in the sense proposed by Ingold (2000: 144–145):

as its line of life, followed to some degree in the journey undertaken. More than food, or rudiments that might have existed in some pre-existence, it is the presence and activity of ancestors that make the growth of other existences happen. People are understood as “centres of progenerative activity, variously positioned within a field of relationships” — more than genealogy or kinship, rhizomatic relationships seem to matter. As Ingold further suggests, drawing on Rom Harré (1998: 3), “each such centre constitutes both a point from which the person perceives the world and a place from which to act”.

An interesting perspective shows the life of this place – where the paths of humans and animals still cross, equally, in their mutual history of shaping the milieu, exchanging substances within this space. The lives in motion observed close up throughout this journey suggest a contiguity with a broader national *sertão* (hinterland), enabling a simultaneous rethinking of what is framed as ‘progress’ and ‘backwardness’ in a broader perspective.

This apprehended *sertão* has a translation with the description given by Luiz Augusto Fischer (2014), drawing on the work of Jorge Caldeira in *História do Brasil com empreendedores*: (History of Brazil with Entrepreneurs). It is described as “not just the dry world of the Northeast, nor simply the unknown Brazil of the backlands, as we commonly think, but that Brazil whose fundamental structure was not the ‘plantation’ That world of large-scale agricultural production is distinct from the one described in the journey in this text: “The world of small-scale primary production, mineral exploitation, and trade along extensive routes, across much of the country’s geography, often carried out by mule and horse”. This was a world in which slavery was present, albeit typically on a smaller scale than in plantation economies, alongside the activities of so-called ‘entrepreneurs of the back fields,’ such as the *tropeiros*. A bit like the business world of the old *Fazenda do Contrato* (Contract Farm) – based on the spoken word; a world of oral tradition, far removed from the impersonal law and institutionalization of modern life, and ultimately, a patriarchal world. While assessing it as homogeneous with respect to these characteristics, Fischer nonetheless underscores the geographical diversity of this formation, extending “from the heart of the Amazon to the semi-arid Northeast, to the east, and to the southern pampas, passing through the general fields and the vast world in which the mameluke *bandeirantes* operated” (Fischer, 2014: 177–179, 181–182).

The case is that the substance of this place historically repeats a sad record: now articulated through different configurations of agrarian business, the region remains inscribed within contemporary mappings of slave labour in Brazil. Notably, Bom Jesus leads the list of reported cases, while Cambará do Sul and Vacaria — both located in the region of *Campos de Cima da Serra* — also occupy prominent positions in this regard (Mourad, 2015: 127).

The Stone House

There is scarcely time to keep thinking about a missed mis-encounter and he arrives, wearing his Sunday best for the day's undertaking: The last of several trips following seven-year ethnographic path previously described. We head toward the municipality of Bom Jesus, almost on the border with the neighbouring São José dos Ausentes, along a route that is almost entirely along a dirt road marked, very rocky and full of potholes, which makes the journeys advance slow. This is also because of the various stops, including the one next to the Princesa dos Campos waterfall, when we cross the municipality of Jaquirana. Four decades earlier, this same route had been regularly taken by Luiz as he drove his employer's *tropas* toward the cities of São Joaquim and Lages, in the neighbouring state of Santa Catarina.

From the belvedere, he admires the landscape, with the sound of the imposing waterfall, seen in the distance, filling our surroundings. In a gradual awe, one sees that what he is showing is the pure landscape of the place. Standing before the waterfall, he remarks simply that he had never before had the opportunity to interrupt his work in order to contemplate that beautiful scene, since, in his own words, he had merely “passed by on the trail”. Before, there had been no time for such a pleasure: certainly, the *tropa* did not stop to contemplate the view. Which, incidentally, is spectacular, even from the roadside. The contemporary belvedere, constructed precisely for admiration, intensifies and invites this encounter between space and time, enabling the delight of pure and simple contemplation. Devoid of any practical use, this moment doesn't serve anything or anybody (should not be an obligation). Speaking of which — about landscapes — we continue to discover scenes similar to those we saw on the short *tropeada* to the ‘back fields’, starting from the *Fazenda do Contrato*. At this period of the year, however, field management through controlled burning is underway, and

throughout the morning we witness several examples of this practice: lone fields, in which dry vegetation burns slowly and steadily. Meanwhile, Luiz doesn't stop recalling the names of places — and the people and situations associated with them along the way — at the same time giving a more detailed account of his own life. Since leaving Bom Jesus shortly after his marriage, he had never returned to the “Stone House,” the place that motivated this journey. Since leaving Bom Jesus, shortly after his wedding, he had never returned to the “Stone House,” the place that motivated this journey of ours. Together, throughout our time on the trail, we deeply experienced on the objective and subjective coming and going that constitutes the trajectory of the landscape — in its temporality intimately related to his historical contingency.

After proceeding along the road beside a long stretch of stone walls enclosing the open fields — many of them uninhabited and even devoid of cattle — we finally reached the main farmhouse and adjacent buildings. Despite the unexpected nature of the visit, and although nearly four decades had passed since Luiz had last been there, the owner immediately recognized him. Following our introductions and an explanation of the purpose of the visit, she welcomed us and permitted us access to the house and to make some video recordings. The house appears to be an imposing structure situated amid the cluster of buildings characteristic of the old ranching establishments of *Campos de Cima da Serra*, standing in marked contrast to the vast open plains surrounding it. The appearance and isolation of the complex immediately suggested the immense labour involved in constructing such buildings in that place an intuition later reinforced by Luiz's detailed account. According to his recollection, the structures had been built by “old Black Uncle Marcelo,” with the assistance of his many children, all of whom lived and worked there. As far as Luiz can remember, Marcelo himself is said to have died on the property at more than one hundred years of age. Over the course of two or three years, these Black inhabitants of the farm collectively transformed rough stone gathered from the surrounding landscape into the buildings that still stand today. During a conversation beside what Luiz described as an “immense” stone corral, it is practically certain that this farm likely originated as a typical *sesmaria*. Even the dimensions as he recalled appeared consistent with this interpretation. Once our exploration of the surrounding grounds and fields was finished, Luiz made a point of insisting that we enter the two-story house. Passing through the kitchen, he led us directly to the living room. It becomes clear what Luiz wanted to show when looking at

the mural painting displayed on the wall, practically reproducing what we all see from the view offered by the room's window. Emerging from a world far removed from theoretical formulations of landscape inscribed upon "paper skins"²¹, he understood, through a different approach, what this work was about²². Even now, when we watch that scene again, we can hardly believe it. In the framing done without us noticing, he himself could be the companion of the *tropeiro* who is in the scene on the wall, framed in a *trompe-l'œil* effect, next to the oxcart positioned under the araucaria trees. Once again, we find evidence of the existence of the notion of landscape in these fields. We are then led to the second floor, where we appreciate the cartography²³ of the *sesmarias serranas* on the walls, here endowed with a different significance. It is evident that the site once belonged to this set, and that its historical presence in the region was extensive. Among these maps, we were able to identify the spot repeatedly mentioned by Luiz: very near to there is the confluence of "the Água Branca and the Rio dos Touros" — his birthplace. Through his gaze, we were ultimately led to discern with emic clarity what the exploratory phase had already suggested when identifying the *sesmeiro* agrarian system in this landscape: namely, the ways in which slavery was woven into its very trajectory.

During the long return journey to his home in Caxias do Sul, Luiz's reflections were heard attentively, his elaborations marked by a subtle metaphorical quality in describing the impression left by the landscapes traversed along the route. His analysis said that the wealth once associated with these lands has vanished. The vast enclosed and cultivated landholdings constructed through the labour of enslaved Black human beings now appear as immense voids. In comparing the present condition of the region to the reality that he knew in his youth, Luiz concludes the former landowners of the colonial agrarian system have become impoverished, precisely because they don't have those hands for the job anymore. "Old black Uncle Marcelo," he recalls, died many years ago, and his numerous children are no longer there. Like Luiz himself, they migrated in search of work in the urban centres of this region.

²¹ The term refers to the fate of Western academic knowledge, which is almost exclusively confined to writing. In the words of Davi Kopenawa, white people "contemplate without rest the paper skins on which they have drawn their own words." (Kopenawa; Albert, 2016: 76).

²² Wisnik (1998, p. 162), citing Prado Júnior, B. (1985: 195-226), draws attention to what Guimarães Rosa (2007 [1956]) ironically highlights in *O Recado do Morro*: "[...] there, in the *sertão*-world, the best reader is the illiterate, who, being outside the surface of the letter, only knows how to read in depth [...]".

²³ Map found in Oliveira. S. F. (1996).

Within this complex narrative unfolding across the *sertão* composed of cities of varying scales, Luiz's historical stance stands out with particular force. His immediate inconformity with the slaveholding and subordinating practices embedded in the construction of this landscape reveals him as a powerful articulator within this space, especially through the precise and timely activation of memory that he made happen. *Sertão* with a face that looks like fields, which in this particular case is not exactly the *pampa*; rather, it evokes a fragment of the "*Campos Gerais*" (general fields) described in the work of João Guimarães Rosa: the region of *Campos de Cima da Serra*. By accepting Luiz's invitation to travel with him, the research ultimately encounters the emptiness constitutive of this landscape itself. A heritage contained within it, still preserved also in this aspect, in this 'way of creation' contained in this dwelling of people and animals, in joint constitution of their milieu. Yet this rarefaction also proves convenient to urban entrepreneurs: a *modus operandi* still containing vestiges of colonialist slave practices.

This article offers a different perspective on race, Blackness, and the disseminated and erased violence of the rural landscapes of southern Brazil. It does so by foregrounding the creative expressions and of Black gaze, thereby re-establishing Black presence within a landscape that today is predominantly white.

The texts arising from our encounters with Luiz demonstrate how Black death is inscribed within this landscape as a memory of racial terror, through which anti-negro racism - the anti-Black violence - erases the physical traces of Black families and communities. By engaging in a dialogue that helps the thinking on the spatiality of Black people, and consequently on the experiences of other non-white local humanities, based on the devalued bodies and lands, we have been able to generate perspectives on the landscapes of Campos de Cima da Serra.

By situating Luiz's recollections within the framework of studies on environmental racism, we demonstrate that class and race do not only negatively impact racialized subjects, but also, that from these other ways of habitant life emerge unprecedented perspectives on the histories of landscapes constituted through racial relations. If the complex negotiations of time, space, and terror from the slave-owning past are inscribed in memory, this is a powerful tool for thinking about the processes of producing toxic, environmentally decaying, and pollution that underpin current ways of racializing spaces. On the other hand, if Luiz's emancipatory attitude in the landscape

has allowed for the reconstruction of contemporary history of work analogous to slavery, it ensures the protagonism of Black people in the historicity of the development of this region of the southern Brazilian plateau.

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