

Documentary of (De)Colonization: *Ex-Pajé* as Border-Filmmaking & Paiter Suruí Re-existence

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Abstract: This essay examines the linkage of epistemological inequities, social and ecological devastation, and ethnocide in *Ex-Pajé*, the product of a collaborative filmmaking effort between writer-director Luiz Bolognesi, “ex-pajé” Perpera Suruí, and members of the Paiter Suruí community. This film serves as a potent counter to productions that side-line Indigenous actors, communities, and epistemologies, both narratively and visually, in favor of white, western protagonists and their saviorism. I argue that *Ex-Pajé* reveals the intersections between cinema and core tenets of decolonial theory. *Ex-Pajé* is a clear product of a “border-thinking” (Mignolo 2012) approach to film production, genre, and form as it portrays the strategies of “re-existence” (Albán-Achinte 2013) that define Paiter Suruí life while confronting ecological, social, and material colonial forces. *Ex-Pajé* visually and narratively reframes the colonial encounter from the perspective of Perpera Suruí, underscoring the need for collaborative story making that centers resistance to the violences of the Modern/Colonial age.

Keywords: Amazonia, Indigenous peoples, Latin American film, Coloniality, Decolonization

Introduction

The title cards that open *Ex-Pajé* share a quote from the *Archeology of Violence* by French anthropologist Pierre Clastres that read, “O etnocídio não é a destruição física dos homens, mas a destruição sistemática de seus modos de vida e pensamento. Enquanto o genocídio assassina os povos em seu corpo, o etnocídio os mata em seu espírito.” This quote establishes the stakes and themes at the center of Luiz Bolognesi and Perpera Suruí’s innovative examination of colonization and Amazonian communities in the contemporary period.

The Paiter Suruí people counted themselves among the Amazon’s many “uncontacted” tribes until the year 1969 when they were “officially” approached by the state of Brazil (“Surui Paiter”). The authors of *Instituto Socioambiental* note, however, that their history of contact largely began in the 19th century when they began to flee from white settlers in the region and often entered into contact with other Indigenous groups (“Surui Paiter”). Official state-backed contact only followed in the mid-twentieth century with further incursions by non-Indigenous settlers into the areas of the Brazilian state of Rondônia who were seeking for opportunities in logging, mining, and rubber resulting in official contact with the Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), Brazil’s state indigenist organization, in 1969 (“Surui Paiter”). The construction of new highways, implementation of rural development projects, and a boom in the region’s population lead to increased conflict, illness, and partial forced assimilation of the Paiter Suruí to Western medicine, education, politics, and economics that, despite their violent potency, have been resisted by generations of Paiter Suruí. Currently the Paiter Suruí reside on the *Terra Indígena Sete de Setembro* with a community of around 1300 individuals spread across eleven villages (“Surui Paiter”). This history of contact between Paiter Suruí peoples, state officials, extractive industries, and evangelizing missions serves as the backdrop for Indigenous life that is portrayed in the film *Ex-Pajé*. This 2019 film presents a complex picture of its protagonist, Perpera Suruí, and life in a community engaged in a constant negotiation and struggle to preserve Paiter Suruí knowledge, land, and ways of life. When viewers first meet Perpera, the eponymous “Ex-Pajé,” he is relegated to working at the evangelical church. Dressed in an oversized suit, in the opening shots he emerges from the forest to take up his post at the front of the church. However, throughout the film we see that Perpera remains much more than the church greeter and that,

despite the condemnation of his practices by outsiders, his community remains invested in his knowledge, healing, and beliefs.

The experiences of Perpera as captured in the film serve as this essay's inspiration for analyzing the cinematic linkage of epistemological inequities, social and ecological devastation, and ethnocide in *Ex-Pajé*. The hybrid docudrama brings the colonial encounter into the twenty-first century through a mix of loosely connected fictional narrative, improvised scenes, and documentary footage. *Ex-Pajé* is the product of a collaborative filmmaking effort between writer-director Bolognesi, "Ex-Pajé" Perpera Suruí, and a cast made up primarily of members of the Paiter Suruí community. Bolognesi and Perpera craft a harsh critique of evangelism and the epistemicide confronted by Indigenous communities of the Americas since the late 15th century. With Perpera Suruí as protagonist, this film serves as a potent counter to various Brazilian and Hollywood productions that often side-line Indigenous actors, communities, and epistemologies, both narratively and visually, in favor of white, western protagonists and their saviorism.¹

The film visually and narratively reframes the colonial encounter from the perspective of Perpera Suruí providing a meditative and visceral portrayal of coloniality that underscores the need for collaborative story making that centers resistance to the violences of the Modern/Colonial age as defined through the paradigm of decolonial theory. I argue and relate here how *Ex-Pajé* illuminates and critiques the "Colonial Matrix of Power" (CMP) as defined initially by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano. Quijano describes the CMP as the interlinked struggle for control over five principal areas of life: (1) economy, labor and products; (2) the natural, material world and its resources; (3) sex and reproduction; (4) subjectivity and knowledge; and (5) authority and its tools of violence and coercion "to ensure the reproduction of these [colonial] patterns of social relations and regulate its changes" (4).

Though *Ex-Pajé* engages each area of the CMP in a multiplicity of ways, its primary focus lay in the realms of categories two and three, linking them together intimately through the film's narrative, centered on health care and generational

¹ This trope remains prevalent across drama and documentary. Notable Hollywood examples include *The Mission* (1986), *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Last of the Mohicans* (1992). More recent films like *Wind River* (2018) and *Hostiles* (2017) attempt to treat Indigenous subjects with more nuance but similarly rely on white stardom to tell their stories. Within Brazilian film similar patterns can be found in films like *Como era gostoso meu francês* (1971), *Hans Staden* (1999), and *Xingu* (2011).

knowledge, and through formal film elements that visually emphasize the material and epistemic borderland of the Paiter Suruí community. With the decolonial analytical paradigms of border thinking, re-existence, and delinking, this essay traces how *Ex-Pajé* reveals the CMP and the strategies implemented by the Paiter Suruí peoples to counter it. Ultimately, my analysis illustrates the pedagogic usefulness of *Ex-Pajé* for illustrating coloniality, its manifestations in the contemporary period, and the resistance or “re-existence” strategies highlighted by *Ex-Pajé* as a film product meant to introduce these themes to a broad audience.

Through close reading of what documentation exists of the film’s production and circulation and the filmic text itself, I argue that Bolognesi and Perpera Suruí’s is the product of an intercultural filmmaking effort reflecting cornerstone decolonial concepts. *Ex-Pajé* is a clear product of a “border-thinking” (Tlostonova and Mignolo 2012) approach to cinematic genre and form and, the drive to “re-exist” (Albán Achinte 2013) and de-link (Mignolo 2017) from neocolonialist forces by the Paiter Suruí as Western thought, religion, and materialism continue to infiltrate the Amazon. My analysis here explores what we can learn from applying and analyzing these concepts from within the context of this cinematic production. I ask what can be learned from aesthetic portrayals of border thinking, interculturality, and re-existence through analysis of this film’s production, film form, and its circulation? How does *Ex-Pajé* reflect these concepts and reveal lessons for viewers, students, critics, and filmmakers?

Luiz Bolognesi’s discussion of the project’s genesis and production reflects a similar aim to challenge paradigms of production and presentation of Indigenous perspectives and material life in interviews during the film’s international and national launches. He has shared his original intent to make a more traditional documentary highlighting the work and beliefs of various *pajés* throughout Brazil only changing his mind after meeting with Perpera and discussing the epistemic conflict underway in his Paiter Suruí community (Bolognesi interviewed by Cinevitor). Bolognesi’s first contact with Perpera occurred when working on a separate project, the docuseries *Juventude Conectada* (2016), where he chronicles the use of cameras, mobile phones, and social media to counter illegal logging and territorial invasions by various Indigenous groups in the Amazon region (Interview with Fundação Telefônica). Bolognesi recounts his first impression and the genesis of the film’s title:

Pedi que eles me apresentassem ao líder religioso. Fiquei surpreso quando me disseram que lá só tinha Ex-Pajé. Já vi ex-jogador de futebol, ex-gerente, mas Ex-Pajé? Quando conheci Perpera, ele me contou que desde a chegada da igreja dizia-se que pajelança era coisa do diabo, e que todos viraram a cara para ele. Para evitar a exclusão, passou a trabalhar como zelador da igreja e, por isso, tem de enfrentar a fúria dos espíritos da floresta, que o atormentam de noite. Percebi que ele não tinha deixado de ser pajé, mas que vivia uma situação opressora e violenta que, na verdade, acontece em muitas aldeias. (Interview with Fundação Telefônica)

Elsewhere, he adopts a similar tone describing his and Perpera's film as a weapon and tool against oppression underscoring what this essay considers as the film's decolonial potential (Interview with Ccine 10).

Intentionally, I focus on the film's form and its parallels to decolonial theory hoping to consider how one might screen this film in a classroom or wider public to introduce discussions on filmmaking, indigeneity, colonization, and decolonial theory. As argued below, *Ex-Pajé* remains exemplary in its protagonization of Perpera and the broader Paiter Suruí community and committed to capturing material and epistemic nuances of Indigenous life in the Amazon, providing opportunities to examine polemical topics emerging of neocolonial contexts such as traditional medicine, evangelization, extraction from an Indigenous perspective. Latin American film, particularly challenging documentary films, rarely break into mainstream national or international markets nor make up promoted or most-watched lists of streaming platforms.² Nevertheless within language, area studies, and film studies programs provide opportunities to employ these productions as teaching and discussion tools where educators can introduce and explore the intersections between theoretical concepts and material experiences of marginalized populations through film production and form. The impetus for this project lay in exploring these intersections through analysis of the discourse of

² Dr. Tamara L. Falicove in *Latin American Film Industries* outlines well industry the challenges and opportunities within Latin American film production noting the continued dominance of Hollywood and U.S. based streaming services. Notable interventions and Latin American streaming services have emerged as competition and opportunity for independent filmmakers, yet their market share and ability to attract mainstream audiences outside of festivals and niche streaming services remains limited. (81-104).

production from the film team and the aesthetic interventions of the film itself. Through analysis of these intersections, I argue that *Ex-Pajé* differentiates itself from other films about and Indigenous peoples and their experiences in key ways that provide novel paths to examining colonial forces and resistance to them in the Paiteer Suruí context.

Additionally, I do not aim to provide detailed analysis of the cultural and cosmological materials presented in the film. I maintain this distance, choosing to focus on the composition of image, sound, and narrative and its relation to more hegemonic, colonialist portrayals of Indigenous peoples and how *Ex-Pajé* counters such modes of storytelling through filmmaking practices that, I argue, parallel decolonial aims of emergent theoretical interventions. The film itself eschews such traditional documentary tendencies in favor of an aesthetic and narrative approach that celebrates Paiteer Suruí knowledge and life without resorting to ethnographic documentary film form that presents Indigenous communities as other in its effort to catalogue and describe through voice-over narration. Rather, this essay engages this film as would a more general public with limited knowledge of the history and cultural intricacies of the Paiteer Suruí community portrayed and no knowledge of their language – a variant of Monde family language in the Tupi group in which nearly all dialogue takes place – thereby relying on the subtitles provided by the filmmakers.

Below, I provide a brief discussion of Brazilian cinematic portrayals of Indigenous peoples to draw contrast with *Ex-Pajé* within the production and circulation of films about Indigenous peoples. I also include introductory explanations of the decolonial paradigms that inspire my analysis. Subsequently, relying on specific scenes and a discussion of the narrative, I illustrate how *Ex-Pajé* portrays the intercultural, material, and epistemic borderland that is the Paiteer Suruí community and how the film contributes to the “re-existence” of its people.

Coloniality at the Cinema

Colonization has consistently been a source of inspiration for filmmakers, writers, and artists from all media across the 20th century in Brazil and throughout the Americas. The contact and clash between diverse cultures provides endless fascination for audiences and offers the opportunity to contemplate nation, identity and history by the filmmaker and his audience. In cultural criticism, moments of

colonization of the Americas are theorized along the same vein as sources of "imagining" the nation (Anderson 1983) or as the "foundational fictions" (Sommer 1991) that typically reify hegemonic ideologies of a nation, its peoples, and history.

The persistent engagement with colonial histories and their mythologization in cinema as essential background to consider contemporary cinematic productions by, about, and made in collaboration with Indigenous peoples in Brazil. This includes those that build upon the critique of more subversive films stemming from the *Cinema Novo* movement like *Como era gostoso meu francês* (1971)³ and *Iracema: Uma transamazônica* (1976),⁴ as well as their engagement with the legacies of other films that parallel more hegemonic histories of the "achamento" in early Brazilian film history in works like silent film adaptations of Alencar's Indianist novels and the oft cited *O descobrimento do Brasil* (1937)⁵ and in more recent films like *Hans Staden* (2000) and *Brava gente brasileira* (2001).⁶ It is within this tradition of white protagonists, discovery, and the construction of European-Indigenous contact as historical event that Bolognesi and Perpera directly intervene in what Kátia Bezerra refers to as the "spectacle of discovery" found period films that too often focus on colonization has a historical occurrence at the origin of nation (28).⁷ Aside from, *Iracema: Uma Transamazônica* what each of the films listed here share are their examinations, be they subversive or not, of the early encounters between white, European colonizers and various Indigenous populations. Ultimately, even films like *Como era gostoso meu francês* and *Brava gente brasileira* that challenge the core myths of Brazil's pacific colonization and the "civilizing" tendencies of peoples of European origin

³ See: Stamm and Xavier (1988), Claus (2001), Gerassi-Nevarro (2005) Trindade (2010), Júnior (2016), Gerassi-Nevarro (2005)

⁴ This film has recently received a bit more attention by scholars as they trace its interventions in form and narrative and the transgressive nature of its themes. See: Wolff (2012), Furtado (2013), Martinez (2016).

⁵ See: Trindade (2010)

⁶ See: Bezerra (2011)

⁷ "A complexidade no processo de reencenação do drama colonial resulta do fato de que esses "scenarios frame and activate social dramas", reavivando estereótipos, mitos e preconceitos que fazem parte do imaginário de uma sociedade (Taylor, 1997, p. 28). De fato, como defende Diana Taylor em seu estudo sobre performance, os espetáculos públicos funcionam como locus de construção de uma identidade coletiva, uma vez que "(i)ndividual and state formation take place, in part, in the visual sphere through a complicated play of looks: looking, being looked at, identification, recognition, mimicry" (id.,p. 30). Isso significa dizer que os espetáculos servem para criar e reforçar uma tradição que, segundo Eric Hobsbawm, envolve, entre outras coisas, tentativa de impor uma leitura hegemônica que, embora calcada na experiência de um segmento, procura se instituir como representativa de toda a comunidade" (Bezerra, 28).

contribute to an imaginary that situates such conflicts firmly in the past. Thus, *Ex-Pajé*, and other films⁸ that focus on timely examinations and protagonization of Indigenous peoples and their resistance to contemporary colonization remain of utmost importance in the national and international circulation of films from Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas.

However, making such films requires attention to the hegemonic tendency to romanticize and historicize Indigenous existence. Robert Stam and Louis Spence in “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction,” their vanguard piece in *Screen*, provide accessible definitions of these topics and discuss a myriad of ways in which these themes, all central to representation of the colonial age and contemporary instances of colonialism, have been dealt with in cinema. Importantly, they caution against the replacement minded notion of “positive image” and simple replication of existent western ways of life but with black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC). They also trace the history of problematic political positioning of the audience in relation to the screen in various colonial and imperial contexts illustrating the failings of these endeavors. Notably the article shares various projects that more successfully subvert the colonial order in various contexts. These examples offer a variety of strategies based in narrative and film form that the anti-colonialist filmmakers have employed. Stam and Spence’s line of inquiry is laid out in a simple series of questions that may guide any reading of a film that portrays a colonial context. They ask:

Which characters are afforded close-ups and which are regulated to the background? Does a character look and act, or merely appear, to be looked at and acted upon? With whom is the audience permitted intimacy? If there is off-screen commentary or dialogue what is its relation to the image? (247)

Such questions guide my analysis of *Ex-Pajé*. In order to address them I turn to border-thinking and re-existence as core concepts that I use to examine the film’s

⁸ In line with the formal interventions of *Iracema: Uma transa amazônica* Brazilian short films *Congo* (Arthur Omar, 1972) and *Mato eles?* (Sergio Bianchi, 1982) have challenged the ethnographic and documentary form. See: Viera (2000), Takemoto and Otsuka (2015), and Sobrinho (2016). More recent films undertaking decolonial work include in collaboration with Indigenous peoples include but should not be limited to: *Birdwatchers* (2009), *Maritirio* (2016), and the entire catalogue of the *Vídeo nas aldeias* project.

production and its interventions in genre, form, and portrayals of Indigenous peoples.

Border thinking, a term that is continuously evolving in the work of decolonial theorists, emerges from the space of epistemic difference and resistance to Western forms of knowledge (Mignolo and Tlostanova 61). In *Learning to Unlearn* (2012) Mignolo and Tlostanova describe border thinking as, “thinking that brings to the foreground different kinds of theoretical actors and principles of knowledge that displace European modernity” (62). For them, this thinking is essential to bringing about an “epistemic shift” that counters and corrects the varied oppressions of the CMP. They write:

For this reason, the decolonial epistemic shift proposes to change the rules of the game—and not just the content—and the reason for which knowledge is produced: Decolonization, instead of working toward the accumulation of knowledge and imperial management, works toward the empowerment and liberation of different layers (racial, sexual, gender, class, linguistic, epistemic, religious, etc.) from oppression and toward undermining the assumption on which imperial power is naturalized, enacted, and corrupted. (Mignolo and Tlostanova 62–63)

Ex-Pajé challenges rules of documentary film form and clearly seeks empowerment for Perpera and the other Indigenous protagonists who continue to maintain traditions despite the efforts of evangelical church and other outside forces that define the CMP.

Second, *Ex-Pajé* is exemplary of what Colombian scholar Adolfo Albán-Achinte has defined as “re-existence,” as a survival and resistance strategy which he defines as:

Decentralization of the established logics that seeks in the profundities of cultures – in this [Colombian] case Indigenous and afro-descendent cultures – the key forms of organization, of production, nutrition, ritual, and aesthetics that make possible, dignify, and re-invent life so that it lasts and transforms. (455, my translation)

Tlostanova takes this definition further in her analysis of post-Soviet, post-socialist contexts, describing re-existence as “a (re)creation of positive life models, worlds, and sensations overcoming the injustice and imperfection of the world” (35). Re-existence in these formulations is thus marked by quotidian acts in its engagement of traditional knowledges and their educational, healing and spiritual practices as counter epistemic colonization. *Ex-Pajé* in its use of documentary style steady camera and the fictional narrative tap into daily life, generational knowledge sharing, and spiritual healing reflecting efforts Paiter Sururí re-existence in both cinematic form and narrative.

Finally, though border thinking and re-existence are not necessarily linked in a teleological sense where they beget this final topic, *Ex-Pajé* reflects their key roles in effort to “de-link from the domains of the CMP” (Mignolo “Coloniality,” 40). Thus, the final element of decolonial theory I employ is what Anibal Quijano described as “desprendimiento,” or in Mignolo’s translation, “de-linking” (Mignolo, “Delinking” 450). For Quijano as interpreted by Mignolo, de-linking from the CMP is a practice that leads to a “decolonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (Mignolo, “Delinking” 452). The urgency of de-linking in *Ex-Pajé* is expressed as matter of life and death for its many of its subjects including Perpera as pajé, an ill Paiter-Sururí woman (Kabena Cinta Larga), the wider natural world, and of the broader community.

Ex-Pajé as Border-Film

Ex-Pajé’s themes are many and each is marked by unique formal treatment via cinematography and sound editing. It incorporates much from the world of documentary filmmaking placing viewers in the role of observer to a multiplicity of conflicts and coexistences that define life in the Amazonian borderlands of the Paiter Sururí. Though constructed around the life of Perpera, the film captures a provide a broad picture of Paiter Sururí quotidian practices, knowledge, and territorial struggles. These themes are largely explored in the films first half which mostly adopts a distanced, documentarian lens where viewers are placed in the role of outside observer who is interpolated into the rhythms and activities of Perpera and a wider selection of Paiter Sururí life. The subjects of the film do not address

the camera in any way as it shifts between the focal lengths and angles to paint a comprehensive picture of Paiter Suruí daily labors, in-between moments, conversations, and other key events.

Through this attention to a mix of staged and actual quotidian activities, the film purposely blends documentary with an invented narrative in its latter half resulting in a hybrid production, or “docufiction” when a member of Perpera’s community is asked to care for a snakebite victim who is not recovering well in a local clinic. The lack of voice over, the predominance of Paiter language, and the narrative turn of the latter half result in a project that communicates the intricacies of the CMP through a meditative and humanizing viewing experience that illustrates the profound agency and resistance strategies of the Perpera and others in his community.

Bolognesi, his interviewers, and various critics have all noted the hybrid nature of the film itself in its blending of documentary and dramatic narrative. Reviewer José Geraldo Cuoto writes, “filmes que abolem a fronteira entre o documentário e a ficção se tornaram nos últimos tempos quase um gênero à parte” (“Cinema”). This is an argument I am inclined to agree with. Bolognesi remains among good company among longer trajectory of films that emerge from the context of the CMP and incorporate strategies that challenge filmic norms in order to contribute to decolonial aims. Specifically, in *Ex-Pajé* there is a direct connection to *Iracema: Uma transa amazônica*⁹ and its director Jorge Bodanzky whose 1969 footage of “official” contact between Paiter Suruí peoples and outsiders is used to open the film (Cuoto, “Cinema”).

According to Bolognesi, the melding of film forms was key to the entire filmmaking process describing how the production team’s time spent with Perpera and his community was completely defined by the Paiter daily rhythm of life and labor rather than one of scheduled rigor that typically defines a film set (Bolognesi interviewed by Cinevitor). Moreover, Bolognesi has recounted that many scenes of work, daily life, and certain conversations resulting in a “convivial” production experience (Bolognesi interviewed by Cinevitor). Ultimately, one of the greatest lessons learned by Bolognesi and the film crew that he has shared in various locations is the notion that the Paiter Suruí peoples are “senhores do tempo” or “owners of time” as opposed to his and a broader Western, consumption driven

⁹ See: Wolff, 2012 and Furtado, 2013.

society that remains an “escravo ao tempo” or “slave to time” (Bolognesi interviewed by Cinevitor).

This temporal logic comes through starkly in the film with its reliance on a steady camera for every shot. Various angles linger offering time to take in all the visual elements of scene be it a close-up of one of the films subjects or one of many landscape shots that serve to situate viewers in the visual and sonic setting of the community. The film is entirely shot using a static, wide angle CinemaScope camera. Bolognesi has discussed the reasoning for this aesthetic choice and how it extended to other elements of production. He explains that, “A escolha foi pela poesia, pelo enquadramento maior, que captura a riqueza gigantesca. Não levamos luz, foi natural e o mesmo aconteceu com o som” (Bolognesi, “Selecionado”). In a separate interview he further shares,

Most of the documentaries on Indigenous subjects are done in a spirit of urgency, with the camera following certain events, without rigor. This result is poorly-constructed images. Since I wanted to capture the spiritual greatness and richness of their culture, I opted for being more careful with aesthetics, a poetic and attentive look at the beauty that surrounds them that they cultivate. Hence the choice of CinemaScope, and rigor in the takes. It was an act of respect and a choice of poetry rather than prose. (Bolognesi, “Berlin”)

Such decisions result in a film that offers stark juxtaposition to other productions that often focus on the chaos and physical violence of colonial encounters and that often fail to capture the epistemic and spiritual richness of the colonized subjects.

Moreover, the static and longer lasting wide-angle shots offer viewers more time to contemplate the varied material and natural elements that define the Paiter Suruí community. The film is comprised of various key juxtapositions that are environmental and material and that emphasize the borderland like existence of Perpera and others in his town. Early on there is a moment where Perpera awaits a ride into town where the shot is filled with the verdant green followed by his ride in a pickup on a treelined road with Perpera bathed in alternating sunlight and shadow in a series of shots that are then replaced by sterile whites and florescent lights. The series of shots visually captures the movement of Perpera and other

community members between traditional homes on Paiter lands and the encroaching Modern/Western material life.

I do not wish to suggest, and nor does the film, that these worlds cannot coexist. Rather, the film uses elements of Modern/Western convenience as a motif that repeats throughout in order to capture contemporary Paiter Suruí material life. Importantly, visual moments where Pepera and others use “Western” technologies including propane, electric lighting, firearms, cameras, video games, computers, and social media as part of their daily experiences serves to counter stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as isolated or materially lacking and restore agency to Paiter Suruí peoples whose use these technologies to preserve themselves, their lands, and ways of life. This material borderland coexistence is brought to viewers’ attention through the use of light and color to create contrast between manufactured objects made of metal and plastic set against the wood grains of Paiter homes or the deep greens and browns of the forest settings. For example, in the series of key shots that find Pepera heading into town, viewer’s eyes are drawn to the bright blue of the propane canister. This blue canister becomes a short subject, a sort of technological vignette within the film as Pepera goes on to exchange it and connect to his stove as he prepares a meal. The camera lingers on his stove and its gas canister as metaphor for the material borderland of Pepera and his community’s way of life.

Other scenes draw our attention to the various technologies employed by Paiter youth for entertainment or activism. There are metacinematic moments where we see a Paiter activist Ubiratan Suruí using his own camera to document traditional practices like preparation of body paints and in his documentation of illegal logging practices. Depiction of video and entertainment technologies also reflect generational differences, such as in the scene a young boy fails to look up from a mobile device to see how the process of preparing traditional body paint is done. Nevertheless, other vignettes illustrate the primacy and utility of technology used to defend Paiter Suruí lands from illegal logging—a clear connection to Bolognesi’s work on *Juventude Conectado* where he initially began work with the Paiter Suruí denunciation of illegal logging, physical violence, and their efforts to reflect traditional forestry practices and map their territories with Google Earth.¹⁰

¹⁰ The efforts captured in interviews on *Juventude Conectado* with Almir Narayamoga Suruí, have also been documented by the *Washington Post*. See: Forero 2013. The Paiter Suruí project can be found with Google earth.

The camera captures use of laptop, Facebook, and mobile phones at various moments throughout the film. Even Perpera must repair the electric light that he uses to keep away bothersome forest spirits who pester him at night for allowing the Christian church to remain in the community.

It is through this hybrid approach to filmmaking and the thematic focus on the intercultural materiality and epistemological resistance to the evangelical colonization that *Ex-Pajé* emerges as a product of decolonial “border thinking.” The inherent intercultural communication and concerns that entered into the filmmaking process as described by Bolognesi and their subsequent reproduction through film form and content offer some paradigmatic examples for non-Indigenous filmmakers partnering, collaborating, and creating with Indigenous communities who still confront barriers to the production and distribution of media. While notable counter examples in Brazil of Indigenous produced media exist,¹¹ *Ex-Pajé* illustrates that there is clearly a space for learning and intercultural collaboration that produces unique media capable of critiquing and strategizing against the CMP. *Ex-Pajé* is a product of a material and epistemic border space. Through the filmmaking process that Bolognesi describes and what it captures of Perpera and Paiter we can trace how the film, “works toward the empowerment and liberation of different layers (racial, sexual, gender, class, linguistic, epistemic, religious, etc.) from oppression” through the representation of spiritual and cultural practices, material life, health, and territorial rights (Mignolo and Tlostanova 62–63).

The “Re-existence” of Perpera

Similar to tracing the border thinking that makes up the as much the production as the visual foci of *Ex-Pajé*, the focus on quotidian practices both in the visual realm, a series of improvised scenes, and the narrative serve to illustrate re-existence of the Paiter Suruí and, more specifically Perpera in his role as *pajé*.

¹¹ Macedo Nunes et. al. explores in detail the move from “object to subject of production” of Indigenous people in their 2014 article that examines the rise of Indigenous media and film in Brazil with other key examples in the Americas. Their final section focuses on the Videos nas aldeias project, a cornerstone of decolonizing media in Brazil. More info can be found in Carvalho et. al. (2011) and at Videos nas aldeias project website. See also organizations like Rádio Yandé and media of authors like Daniel Munduruku and Kaká Werá.

Re-existence as formulated by Albán-Achinte and Tlostonova relies on quotidian practices to overcome oppressions and create new worlds. In the case of Perpera, much of this is centered around the preservation and transmission of his knowledge. Throughout the film, despite his role as “Ex-Pajé,” it remains apparent the members of his community still respect his way of knowing and being. In the handful of scenes where he shares knowledge with others it is difficult to tell what has been staged and what has been captured as documentary. This is a limitation of the docudrama format as much as of the intervening presence of the camera itself that suggests always an element of subjective choice either at the time of filming or in the editing process. Despite these factors, Bolongesi and Perpera want to illustrate the precarity of his position resulting from the colonizing force of the evangelical church in their community.

The precarity of Perpera’s borderlands and his re-existence are often captured visually through the various juxtapositions between the Western world and that of Perpera. Following his visit to the sterile, white light of the local grocer the film brings us back into the rainforest lands of Paiter community with a scene depicting Perpera and his nephew (Kennedy Suruí) fishing. The fishing scene is comprised of four angles, one focused on the river itself, another introducing its subjects at medium range setting them in the deep greens of the rainforest, another shot from behind that lingers as they talk, and a final close on the bait of grubs that they use. These shots of Perpera and Kennedy reveal a Paiter space for knowledge sharing that contrasts starkly with the cold interior of the evangelical church in previous scenes.

The conversation between Perpera and his nephew is in Paiter language. I share the English subtitled version here. The dialogue underscores the laudable curiosity of the nephew, but simultaneously hints at the lack of prior knowledge suggesting Perpera has few opportunities to share such knowledge. The nephew rattles off one question after another:

What’s the name of this spirit Perpera? The river’s. What’s it called?... Only shamans can speak to them? How would the contact him? ... Would they only appear in the river? At the village too? Would the spirit speak to a normal person too?... Would it give him fish? Would it make fishing easier? Could he actually see the spirit? (*Ex-Pajé*)

Perpera relates various answers to these questions hinting at his greater role both historically and one he will return to in the latter half of the film.

This scene is also notable for its sound. Though close attention to sound in prior scenes reveals a setting marked by a background chorus of birds, bugs, plants, and other diegetic sounds of the jungle, the solitary shot of the river is the first of many of the natural world that establishes the Amazonian setting using all the synesthetic wealth cinema provides. In this way, the film seeks to offer the natural world as another protagonist and key quotidian force in the life of Perpera that marks his routine existence. It is a force unknowable to the film's Western audiences, but Perpera and Bolognesi attempt to communicate its overwhelming presence with a variety of shots containing only non-human subjects with various non-human sounds providing the subtle soundtrack to the almost music-less film. The result is the portrayal of the multispecies world that guides Perpera, informs him, and provides for the community. This guidance and by unseen forces is captured throughout the film with camerawork that traces the wandering gaze of Perpera. Perpera almost never looks directly into the camera as his eyes are constantly diverted to the world around him suggesting an other-worldly, or "beyond-than-human"¹² realm that marks his daily life. This motif of Perpera's attention to something beyond himself repeats throughout the film while he is by the river, at home, or while he is working as a greeter at the evangelical church. The scenes of Perpera in his comically oversized white button-down shirt and his diverted attention frame the film's overarching narrative providing both the opening and closing scenes of the film. In both scenes the awkwardly dressed Perpera gazes up to a tree filled with blooms and as the sound of buzzing slowly drowns out the hymns of the background. Similar use of sound and image reflects, beyond-the-human forces, when Perpera plays the healing flute for a victim of snakebite, the sounds of the flute are echoed by the natural world as it seems to respond in kind as the sounds of birds, insects, or mammals those produced by the Paite instrument creating a visual and sonic representation for viewers of the multispecies world that defines Perpera's life and re-existence.

¹² Marisol de la Cadena in *Earth Beings* (2015) theorizes around forces that intervene and are only equivocally understood and accessed by Western researchers working with Indigenous subjects as beings that are "más allá de lo humano." Though this stems from her research with Andean communities in Perú, it parallels the affective and epistemic realities that Bolognesi discusses in interviews and comes through in the film itself.

The focus on sound, another aspect of the film *Bolognesi* has highlighted in supplementary materials provided on *YouTube*, reflects the film's attention to quotidian aspects of Paiter Suruí existence and how they are interwoven with the interior life and healing arts known by Perpera as pajé (*Bolognesi*, "Equipe"). In this way the film illustrates the possibility of another world as it seeks to delve into the profundities of Perpera and Paiter Suruí practices. Though no film can adequately relate completely the intricacies of traditional Paiter knowledge and practices, *Ex-Pajé* is able to hint at the existence of a world that as, Albán-Achinte suggests, dignifies, reinvents, and transforms life.

The focus on nature and re-existence that counters the CMP also underscores a key, yet to be mentioned tenant of decolonial theory – that of pluriversality.¹³ As Mignolo writes:

Pluriversality as a universal project is aimed not at changing the world (ontology) but at changing the beliefs and the understanding of the world (gnoseology)... viewing the world as an interconnected diversity instead, sets us free to inhabit the pluriverse rather than the universe. And it sets us free to think decolonially about the pluriversality of the world rather than its universality. ("On Pluriversality" x)

The re-existence of Perpera and its representation in this film underscores the possibility and necessity of pluriverse that counters the universalist tendencies of the CMP and its ties to Western Christian cults. In the case of *Ex-Pajé*, though the universalizing forces are multiple they are primarily consolidated in the form of the evangelical church and its unflatteringly portrayed lifeless, leader in two close ups. The close ups of the absent gaze of the evangelist contrast starkly with the to the curious gaze of Perpera at key moments in the film's first and final church scenes.

These juxtapositions, though a clear visual condemnation of the church's role in the community, do not necessarily prohibit their coexistence. The film, as much as it is a direct critique of ethnocide promoted by the evangelical church,

¹³ The idea of the pluriverse appears throughout writings of decolonial thinkers and stems from the Zapatista notion of a world in which many worlds coexist or, "un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos" (Gahman, "Zapatismo").

nevertheless, illustrates an ultimately harmonious resolution to the illness of the snake bite suffering woman. There is no explosive confrontation between Perpera and the pastor or the congregation, merely indirect condemnations of his work. This lack of confrontation leaves open a possible question as to whether Perpera's re-existence makes possible a pluriversal world that respects and allows different ways of knowing and being to cohabitate one space.

Health, Spirituality, and Delinking

The re-existence of Paiter-Suruí spiritual practice in the narrative turn that takes place in the latter half of film provides a life-or-death allegory for the stakes of delinking from the CMP and the re-existence of Indigenous epistemologies. The narrative that emerges results from a venomous snakebite suffered by a woman played by Kabena Cinta Larga. Roughly the last third of the film chronicles the story of her illness and is marked by various shots of a catatonic Kabena in a humble, rural hospital setting. These shots repeat as members of the community visit her and are typically followed by shots of Perpera establishing a connection between her wellbeing and his activities on the screen. As Kabena's condition fails to improve, community members begin to turn to Perpera for aid in the healing process. Notably absent, throughout this process is the white leader of the evangelical church.

While others struggle to understand why she will not wake up Perpera states simply, "Our enemy's spirits sent that snake and we haven't asked our spirits to protect her. She is in danger" (*Ex-Pajé*). Perpera is then invited to the hospital. En route, they stop at a store, and he is offered a bottle of water to which Perpera responds, "Since you've asked me, now we need to follow our traditions. It's better not to ingest anything from the white man" (*Ex-Pajé*). Despite the fear of the pastor's displeasure, Perpera prays over her calling for aid from Goãh Ney, the river spirit discussed with his nephew in the aforementioned river scene. When she still does not awaken, he tells his nephew that he must construct a healing flute to which is nephew responds: "How? I can get it for you but I don't know how to do it" and asks "How does it heal?" (*Ex-Pajé*). Perpera responds, "It's very powerful. It summons the forest's spirits to protect the village" (*Ex-Pajé*).

In subsequent scenes we see another member of the community construct the flute while the flute-maker's son observes, another scene that forefronts the

hampered transmission of knowledge. Viewers here, as in other scenes bear witness to the construction of the flute, but in a subversion of more traditional documentary form, we are offered little explanation as to the specificity of the material or the way of construction beyond what the camera offers. Leaving open these questions underscores the unknowability of these customs and the film's desire not to document but to offer something more akin to intercultural experience that de-links from traditional documentary and ethnographic filmmaking that historically serves to catalogue rather than decolonize.¹⁴ In this way *Ex-Pajé* reflects a conscious movement away from the colonial project of archiving, cataloguing, researching, and explaining Indigenous cultures as a way of epistemic domination. Though this film does not reflect the pure vision of Indigenous audiovisual production due to the involvement of non-Indigenous collaborators, its divergence from traditional genre, form, and protagonization of Perpera and his community reflect an intercultural production and that situates *Ex-Pajé* within the "decolonial visual turn" where productions globally have begun to pay "attention to the regionally and historically specific ways that colonialism has had impacts all over the globe" as films and criticism "attend to these varying colonial encounters in order to reveal the complex manifestations of primitivizing and racializing processes in image and film" (Shankar, "Primitivism").

The eschewing of description and ethnography is particularly prominent in scenes that capture the power of the Perpera's healing flute instrument. The scenes of its construction and use consist of an intricate montage that is among the film's most sonically and visually striking. The series of shots opens with a frame of a bare tree standing in an overgrown field, a shape that parallels that of the person-sized flute itself. We trace the flutes genesis and the contributions of community members in its construction. The montage is dominated by sounds of the jungle in shots of the river, logged areas, and backlit wetlands that follow until we find Perpera with the completed instrument at his home. Perpera blows into the flute and the multispecies world responds in a series of ambiguous sounds that include

¹⁴ In the introduction to ethnographic filmmaking for Oxford Bibliographies, Arjun Shankar writes: "Ethnographic film, given its history as a vestige of colonial visual culture, has been defined by and constrained by the racist and imperial ideologies of those who were the earliest ethnographic filmmakers. Scientific, distanced, observational film-making techniques continued the colonial quest for totalizing knowledge through the romantic ideal that film was "objective." At the same time, the earliest ethnographic films relied on the perceived difference between white, Western, "civilized," "modern" filmmakers and non-white, "primitive," tribal, backwards peoples rendered mute on-screen" ("Primitivism").

echoes of the flute, diegetic responses from wildlife, and a series of non-diegetic tones that parallel the flute's deep and resonating sounds. These tones usher in a montage of landscape shots, members of the community, and the destruction of a termite mound that appears to be related to Perpera's ceremony.

At the end of this montage Bolognesi inserts a non-diegetic, highly recognizable camera shutter sound that cuts away to two ethnographic photographs from the Acervo PUC Goiás depicting traditional dressed Paiter peoples at the moment of contact. Though fleeting amidst the music of the healing flute, the photos remind viewers that *Ex-Pajé* is but another chapter in the longer colonial history of contact. The flute with its sound that resonates in the present is also connected to the pre-contact past whose end is marked by these photographs. The cultural and spiritual forces evoked by the sounds of the flute and the images of the montage reflect the fight to de-link from the CMP by Perpera and the life and death stakes of this process. At the end of the flute's song the film culminates in a return to the hospital where we find the snake-bit woman's eyes open once again.

This sequence clearly intends to open a space for the traditional Paiter Surui healing practices¹⁵ that have fallen victim to the epistemic violence of the church. Importantly, the woman's healing is completed in the sparse setting of the rural hospital perhaps leaving room for the coexistence of different types of care. The montage, which ends with Kabena's return home, reflects some level of incompleteness of Western medicine for Indigenous peoples. This commentary on health care is carried throughout the film from an early moment when Perpera laments that, "People used to see the shaman but now they take aspirins" to the arrival of a medical van where a doctor administers prescriptions as Perpera looks on from a distance (*Ex-Pajé*). This is not to suggest that Indigenous peoples do not benefit from the taking of Western medicines, rather that there remains an understudied, ill-understood need for a holistic approach to health and community wellbeing. Though the film presents this argument in a perhaps too-didactic, teleological fashion that links Perpera and his prayers and flute to the woman's well-being, the narrative allegorizes the suffering of Indigenous peoples under the

¹⁵ Aside from the oppression of traditional medicinal practices health care remains a constant issue for rural Indigenous communities throughout Brazil. Risks are particularly acute for more recently contacted peoples in the Amazon who still lack immunities and suffer newfound illnesses wrought by drastic changes to their lives. However, aside from specific case studies in select communities little research has been done on the health needs of Indigenous communities throughout Brazil. See Coimbra and Santos (2003) and Coimbra et al. (2013).

universalizing and oppressive practices of the CMP. The life of the Paiter woman is the epistemic well-being of Perpera and the broader Paiter community.

For the woman, Perpera, and the various young people of the film this act of re-existence involved in the creation and playing of the flute is also an act of delinking from the universalizing desires of the CMP's evangelical vanguard that has attempted to suppress such practices by denying Perpera as pajé and warning parishioners of his messages. The film demonstrates how, despite the oppressive material and epistemic forces, Perpera and his power linger and resist. *Ex-Pajé* thus serves as a record of Perpera and his community's attempts to delink from the CMP in order to produce the "decolonial epistemic shift and bring to the foreground other epistemologies"—in this case that of the Paiter Suruí peoples (Mignolo, "Delinking" 452).

Conclusion

In order to conclude and contemplate the significance of *Ex-Pajé* to Perpera and the Paiter Suruí it is necessary to return, perhaps unorthodoxly, to the beginning of the film. In the opening scenes Perpera's nephew visits him with a package containing two-volumes of research by a French anthropologist named Cedric. Perpera and his nephew, discussing this in Paiter Tupi-Monde language, marvel at the pages and the following conversation ensues:

Nephew: "You remember Cedric, the anthropologist?"

Perpera: "It's his research. Let's see. It's big, isn't it? It's divided into two parts. "

Nephew: "It's in French" "I can't understand It's in his language. It's all your stories, about the Paiter Suruí's traditions."

Perpera: "He liked asking me about when I used to be a shaman. That's how the white men do it, right? It looks well made. (*Ex-Pajé*)

Afterwards, Perpera returns with other photos once shared with another anthropologist, Betty Mindlin.¹⁶ These are among the first lines of spoken

¹⁶ See Mindlin (1985). Her life was also dramatized for television in the 2017 series *Diários da Floresta*.

dialogue. They firmly establish the conflict that lay at the heart of this film and the intervention it attempts in terms of representation of the Paiteer Suruí. Unfortunately, and expectedly, there is very little media coverage or documentation of the Paiteer Suruí opinion of the filmmaking process of *Ex-Pajé* or the final product itself. However, the film's direct engagement with the anthropological enterprise; its challenge to the spiritual and epistemic oppression of the evangelical church; and, above all, its profound valorization of Paiteer Suruí epistemology result in a film that beckons viewers to meditate on the dire consequences of contemporary colonization.

Viewers of *Ex-Pajé* are not offered an in depth, voice-over explained view of the epistemologies and cultural practices that often define a more traditional ethnographic documentary film, and it has not been my goal to provide such explanations here. Rather, my analysis has shown how *Ex-Pajé* emerges from a space of border thinking as it represents and contributes to the ongoing decolonial projects of re-existence and delinking. Its interventions in formal film elements and narrative build upon past works in Brazilian cinema while offering a unique aesthetic that counters more hegemonic tales of colonial encounters.

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