

disPOSSESSION: Exploring Mennonite and Indigenous Land Usage in Paraguay through Art¹

Miriam Rudolph, *University of Manitoba*

Introduction

My artwork, which includes the cover illustration of this issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, is very closely linked to who I am and where I am from. I grew up in a Mennonite community in Paraguay. For my most recent body of work I researched the implications of land usage, deforestation, and agricultural expansion in and around my community and Paraguay more generally, a topic that inevitably became more complicated once I started to delve deeper into the ramifications of colonialism, settler narratives and the impacts on local populations.

disPOSSESSION is a body of work about the accumulation of wealth for a few and the displacement of many with a focus on the expansion of beef and soy production in Paraguay, the ensuing environmental, social, and economic consequences, as well as connected indigenous land rights and peasant food sovereignty issues. In my artworks I explore the disappearance of the dry forests of the Paraguayan Chaco due to deforestation, as well as the idea of enclosure as a symbol of privatization and capitalist systems, the displacement of local populations due to land grabs, and the strug-

gle to maintain diversity through seed saving traditions in the face of expanding monocultures.

My research methodology consisted of gathering information from essays, academic and newspaper articles, documentaries, literature, satellite imagery, personal observations, and testimonies, which provided inspiration for my artworks. I work with both scientific and empirical knowledge. I will present four main topics addressed in my prints: land, enclosure, and dispossession; cattle ranching and deforestation; soy business and displacement; and food sovereignty, seed saving, and hope.

Land, Enclosure, and Dispossession

Paraguay is a small landlocked country in the centre of South America. It has a population of 6,800,000 and is one of the poorest countries in South America. Geographically, Paraguay consists of two main regions—Eastern and Western Paraguay—divided by the Paraguay River. Eastern Paraguay used to be covered with subtropical rainforests, of which only 7 percent remain today.² Frequent precipitation and highly fertile soil make this region desirable for farming and large parts of the east are used for soy plantations as well as cattle ranching.

I grew up in Western Paraguay, also called the Gran Chaco, in the Menno Colony. Aside from a few large-scale ranches and hardwood extraction operations, the Chaco was nearly untouched by Europeans until the 1920s when the first group of Mennonites settled there. My maternal grandparents were born in Manitoba. Both emigrated as children with their families during the first immigration wave to Paraguay in 1927. The general belief and narrative in my community is that God has led Mennonites to the Chaco—a region often referred to as the Green Hell due to its dense, dry forests and periods of severe drought and heat—to “subdue the earth” as commanded in Genesis 1:28. This is interpreted as needing to tame the hostile wilderness by bulldozing it and converting it into “useful” land. The religious legitimacy given to appropriation of the land reinforces an unwavering sense of entitlement in the settler community. Despite the indisputable fact that indigenous peoples lived in the Chaco when the Canadian and European settlers arrived, the common claim of the settler myth remains that “there was nothing here when we came, and we made something of it.”³ The land was “*terra nullius*. Empty. Vacant, uncultivated, unproductive. Somehow lacking or incomplete.”⁴

From the beginning of the twentieth century, and continuing with the arrival of the Mennonites in the 1920s and early 1930s, the Paraguayan government also promoted the establishment of capitalist companies and landownership in the Chaco region. Their presence and economic development would help ensure state authority over the region.⁵ These colonization efforts contributed to the territorial dispute with Bolivia that led to the Chaco War (1932–1935). Colonization meant the parcelling, privatization, and fencing in of land. The fencing in of commons to create enclosures began in the United Kingdom in the sixteenth century, a period that is generally referred to as the “birth of capitalism”; by the 1920s capitalism had arrived in the Chaco.⁶ One recurring image in narratives by indigenous people is of the fences that appeared: fences that kept them out; fences that cut off traditional routes, access to rivers, fish, game, and water; fences that separated them both from their territories and from their subsistence practices of hunting and gathering.⁷ (See cover image: *Enclosure II*.)

Paraguay is one of the countries with the most unequal land distribution in the world. According to a report by a Truth and Justice Commission from 2008, 85.5 percent of all farmland lies in the hands of 2.6 percent of farmers.⁸ This is largely the fault of poor land governance and illegal land grabs. For example, during his 35-year dictatorship from 1954 to 1989, the US-backed president, Alfredo Stroessner, gave away large tracts of land to his associates in exchange for favours. One of Paraguay’s wealthiest men received a gift of 50,000 hectares that was destined for peasants under an agrarian reform law. To this day peasants are fighting to regain access to part of that land.⁹ Foreign investment firms have even larger land holdings. To put this into perspective, my cousin, who is a Mennonite farmer, said that to live quite comfortably with a large house, multiple vehicles, satellite television, internet, etc., you need a ranch of about 500 hectares. Most subsistence farmers in Paraguay live on 3–10 hectares of land. According to a land titles official in the Menno Colony, many individual Mennonites own between 1000 and 10,000 hectares of land.

Paraguay has been a democracy since 1989. I remember the coup d’état in that year. It was my sixth birthday. My family and I had just returned from one year in Germany and we were on the bus, crossing the bridge that leads from Asunción, the capital, across the Río Paraguay to the Chaco. On the bridge a convoy of tanks led by General Rodríguez rolled in to depose the dictator. We weren’t directly impacted by this shift, but I remember my parents were excited that we finally lived in a democracy, even though conservative party loyalties continue to this day.

Paraguay had its first left-leaning president from 2008 to 2012. Fernando Lugo had good intentions of tackling a much overdue land reform to give more access to land to smaller holders again and to restrict deforestation by law, but he was impeached in 2012 before he could achieve his goals. This was considered as a coup by most of the world, rather than a legitimate impeachment. Many of Paraguay's wealthy elite as well as foreign investors would have lost part of their lands under the reform. A majority of Mennonite landowners were also opposed to land reforms and stricter deforestation laws.

In the Chaco, the Mennonites live next to indigenous communities, landless Latino peasants, and large estates owned by Paraguayan elites and, increasingly, by international investors and transnational corporations. I was raised in this socially complex setting with a colonial past and present. Living standards, access to land, food, and education, as well as interests in land usage vary widely between the different groups. The most visible difference in living standards around the Mennonite colonies can be seen in the difference in dwellings. Most Mennonite houses are large and solidly built with fired brick, plastered and white-washed, and surrounded by gardens and small orchards. Many Mennonite properties are surrounded by tall brick walls and wrought-iron fences to keep day labourers and beggars out. The indigenous people who have full-time employment in the Mennonite communities often dwell in simple two-room brick houses that have a tin roof and possibly a wooden door or a sheet to cover the main entrance, and no plumbing or cooking facilities. A typical hut of many of the indigenous people and rural peasants living in more remote communities often consists of an assemblage of roughly hewn palm trunks, boards, and tin sheets, forming structures that are still quite solidly built compared to many more makeshift shelters.

The spectrum of religious and cultural conservatism among German-speaking Mennonites in Paraguay today has a broad range. In my community the modern amenities and luxuries include internet, television, air conditioning, restaurants, luxury SUVs, high-end pickup trucks, and a growing number of private airplanes. The core Mennonite value of simplicity has been abandoned with the increasing prosperity of the community, and much thinking about landownership and material possessions among the Mennonites in the Chaco today is based on the prosperity gospel, with its precept that God blesses those richly who obey and please him. Sadly, I must admit that my community is quite racist and very much paternalistic, wanting to bring religion and progress to the local communities, but being unaware of the cultural destruc-

tion and social injustice they themselves are causing. An indigenous person, for example, is rarely seen as anything more than a labourer; the thought that indigenous people could obtain a university degree or run for politics does not occur to most people. Spanish-speaking migrants and indigenous people are treated as second- and third-class citizens; they are generally seen as inferior and less smart. Mennonites blame indigenous people for their poverty, rather than seeing as root causes colonization and dispossession, including the loss of access to resources, such as land, clean water, healthy food, and quality education, and the loss of culture and self-esteem.

The cover illustration of this issue of *JMS* comes from my first series of prints, titled *Enclosure*; it explores part of the narrative of dispossession. I use the imagery of lightly etched figures of men, women, and children, with fences crossing the entire image, and detailed drawn sections of dense forest printed upside-down and disappearing off the edge of the paper. The translucency of the figures suggests a lack of presence, either a distant past or a disappearing future, while the other components of the image allude to separation or enclosure and the disappearance of the dry forests, an inversion of the natural order. On a more technical level, this series was the result of my first attempt to layer my images more freely. They are copper etchings, and I started to etch a whole series of small printing plates containing one image component each and then layered them in various combinations and arrangements. I have created a library of etched plates that I utilize as drawing tools to build up the imagery more intuitively on the sheet of paper, while maintaining some control over the narrative content. This method of printing allowed me to let my prints grow exponentially later on.

Cattle Ranching and Deforestation

As a landscape, the Chaco consists of palm tree marshes closer to the river and then turns largely into a semi-arid dry forest. Most of the vegetation here is thorny with small hard leaves that prevent the loss of moisture. There are also lots of cacti. The Chaco is generally viewed as a hostile landscape that needs taming by the settler community. However, this region is recognized as the second lung of South America next to the Amazon, and the habitat of many endangered species, as well as home to the last uncontacted tribe of the Ayoreo people. There are still large tracts of forest in this region, although they are disappearing rapidly, and with the cur-

rent deforestation rate they could be gone within twenty-five years.¹⁰ In 2014 Paraguay had the highest deforestation rate in the world.¹¹

In 2015 I travelled to the Chaco on a research trip for graduate school and to teach a printmaking workshop to a group of indigenous artists. I talked to a lot of local people—both Mennonite and indigenous—about land usage and potential issues. I also had a chance to get an aerial view of the landscape over part of the Mennon Colony lands. Before these interviews I was reassured by a forestry official and some farmers that Mennonites abide by the laws established in the 1970s that require a land owner to leave 25 percent of the forest standing on his land, along with an additional 20 percent of treed windbreaks surrounding fields. However, a land titles official remarked that some Mennonites will cut corners if given the opportunity and there is no law enforcement if the rules are not observed. From my aerial vantage point I did not see 45 percent tree coverage, but rather what appeared to be 5 to 10 percent coverage by treed windbreaks. According to several ranchers, in more recent forest cuts the percentage of remaining tree coverage has been more strictly enforced and observed, although penalties for not observing the rules cost less than the gains from creating more grasslands, and therefore compliance still appears to depend on the discretion of each rancher.

I loved growing up in Paraguay and I feel a deep connection with the nature there. There was always something magical to see on trips and excursions: a flock of ostriches on the savannah, a parrot in a tree, a red-necked stork by a pond, a flock of flamingos in a lagoon, a turtle or an armadillo crossing the street, and tapir or peccary tracks by a watering hole. When I go back now, the most notable change is the disappearance of the dry forests, making way for more cattle ranches and soy plantations. While many of the bird species that prefer grasslands have increased, the presence of mammals that live in the forests has decreased due to the loss of habitat. However, much more problematic than the agricultural practices of the Mennonites are the foreign investment firms purchasing land solely for exploitation of the local resources—soil, water, and labour—to create an export crop that doesn't benefit the local communities in any way. In 2015, 94 percent of all farmland in Paraguay was being used for export crops.¹² Due to poor governance, the government collected only 12 percent of the predicted export taxes from soy firms in 2014, and only about 4 percent of what they could collect on property taxes.¹³

To portray the largest industry in Paraguay and the Mennonite colonies, namely cattle ranching, I made the large-scale print *Col-*

onization by Cattle. I wanted to continue building up imagery by taking advantage of the repetition and reproducibility of printing plates, and once I had figured out how to layer printing plates more freely on a sheet of paper, the options became endless. I started to layer printed images over and over again to build up large-scale imagery that dwarfs smaller counterparts. I decided to work with the imagery of a growing cattle herd that displaces the dry forests that are burning after being cut down. This piece kept growing over the period of three months to the size of twenty-one feet in length. I opted to display it like an Asian scroll to display the epic proportion of the ongoing linear narrative of cause and effect, and the sheer number of cattle pushing forward to replace the dwindling forests. The whole piece shows approximately 2,400 cows, the number of cattle slaughtered in my home town alone every three days, mainly for export to Europe and Asia. In the past decade, the Mennonite cooperatives have built large-scale state-of-the-art slaughterhouses and meat processing plants which continue to drive the expansion of deforestation for new pastureland feeding the economic meat boom. In 2014, Paraguay was the sixth largest exporter of beef in the world.¹⁴

Soy Business and Displacement

Besides cattle ranching, soy is another major industry in Paraguay—a market in which the Mennonites also have a share.¹⁵ In 2014, 62 percent of agricultural land was used for soy. Only 6 percent of land was planted for local consumption, with such crops as manioc, beans, and sweet potatoes.¹⁶ Also in 2014, 96 percent of soybeans grown in Paraguay were destined for export as livestock feed to maintain “meat security” in western countries.¹⁷ The main slogan of agribusinesses and expanding family farms is the modernization of agriculture and the eradication of world hunger. However, research shows that large-scale genetically modified agriculture is by no means the better agriculture and world hunger is made worse by the displacement of peasant farmers who lose access to their own food production.¹⁸ Peasants and small-scale farmers make up one-third of the world’s population, yet they make up two-thirds of the world’s food producers.¹⁹ When local farming populations lose access to land and the opportunity to grow their own food, many migrate to the cities dreaming of a better life, but generally they end up in the slum belts instead. A similar trend can be observed with the indigenous settlements and slums on the outskirts of Mennonite towns.

The dominant explanation for migration of indigenous people to the Mennonite communities reveals the pervasiveness of the settler myth. In school we were taught, for example, that the indigenous people came to the Mennonite pioneer settlements because they were starving, since there was nothing to eat in the Chaco. A recent publication by ethnographer Hannes Kalisch and his Enlhet²⁰ father-in-law Ernesto Unruh illuminates the indigenous perspective on this history of settlement through the first-hand narratives of Enlhet elders. These narratives detail how Mennonite settlers built roads across Enlhet sweet potato plantings and placed the new settlements on their fields. The Enlhet did not want to lose their fields, but the Mennonites would not listen.²¹ Prior to colonization the Enlhet had also kept goat herds, supplying a consistently available meat source, especially if wild game became scarce. During colonization, the goats repeatedly entered into the cotton and watermelon plantings of the Mennonites, creating extreme conflict, to the point that some Mennonites whipped the indigenous goat owners when the latter argued for their right to keep the goats on their land. Living in a culture that avoids conflict at all cost, the Enlhet eventually slaughtered all their goats. In the end, they lost access to their own fields as well as their secure meat source, and hunger became more common. They became increasingly dependent on work, pay, and food provisions from the Mennonites who now made all the decisions on the land.²² Indigenous poverty is rooted in dispossession: their lands were taken away by a government who sold it to settlers, entrepreneurs, and corporations, and the Mennonite settlers are complicit in the process of dispossession.

The indigenous fields likely looked quite different from the Mennonite fields planted in neat rows, and therefore the indigenous peoples were not considered capable farmers. However, it is a simplistic and erroneous colonial attitude that categorizes local land usage as “unscientific,” “non-modern” and “unproductive,”²³ while in fact traditional land usage is generally more efficient due to polycultures, meaning that multiple crops are grown together. Less inputs such as fertilizers, water, and pesticides are needed, because the variety of plants return nutrients to the soil, denser planting prevents more evaporation, and polycultures keep insects and diseases at bay. Today, many Mennonite farmers in Paraguay embrace the newest technologies such as treated seeds, chemical inputs, and machinery in their growing farming operations. The mechanization of agriculture and the continued economic growth since the 1980s has led to the cultivation of ever larger fields.

Mennonite farmers reinvest their profits in the purchase of new lands, leading to more agricultural expansion.

To address the monoculture soy production in Paraguay, I created *The Soy Field*. I opted to work in a grid to mirror the parceling and gridding of the land and at the same time create a fragmented narrative. I combine my own grid with satellite imagery of regions in the Chaco where recent soy plantations are cropping up. I again work with layers of imagery to portray a kind of take-over by the soy plants on the land. The scale of the piece, which originally covered forty feet of wall space, also gives a sense of that take-over through its overwhelming size. On some of the tiles I have printed a more mechanical pattern of plants to reference the genetically engineered monocultures. On other tiles I have printed a red droplet pattern to reference the repeated application of agrotoxins that fall on the land and seep into the ground, an apparent necessity to keep diseases, fungi, and insects at bay, but with likely harmful consequences for the environment and human health.

As part of the installation of *The Soy Field*, *The Garden*, displayed as a single paper tile on one wall, is the small-scale counterpart to the enormous scale of soy production, and represents a traditional polyculture. For *The Garden*, I have printed many layers of traditional crop plants like corn, beans, manioc, squash, and sweet potatoes, that grow prolifically together and form a lush, healthy thicket of food crops planted in a small space. Several indigenous people I interviewed in 2015 explained that the land plots in their settlements on the outskirts of the Mennonite towns are not big enough nor of good enough soil quality for vegetable or subsistence gardens. While recently some land for plantings has been assigned to them by the Mennonites, it is 20 kilometres away from their homes, and after long days of low-pay work and limited modes of transportation these gardens simply are not very practical or accessible.²⁴

Food Sovereignty, Seed Saving, and Hope

Another issue with soy is the genetic modification and patenting of seeds, which is the equivalent of privatization of seed ownership, or another kind of fencing in of commons. Farmers lose their right to save their own seeds, while at the same time the biodiversity of food crops is being threatened. Addressing the loss of seed saving traditions, in *Displacement* I use the ancient form of a seed storage jar as a symbol for the preservation of seeds that is being threatened by a pneumatic soy seeder.

Since most of my work is rather critical and melancholy, I did want to add a more hopeful note to this body of work. As a symbol of the hope that things can change for the better I chose the seed, the site of potential for new life. *Seeds of Hope* is a free-hanging banner suspended above ceramic seed jars that hold the sacredness of life that is embodied in a seed. The vertical triptych invokes a gesture of blessing from above for the labour of planting and the traditions of saving seeds. The multitude of hands symbolize the collective effort needed to fight for the right to save seeds and to produce food in a sustainable way. The hand gestures suggesting the act of planting, in conjunction with the imagery of seed germination cycles on the jars, convey the passing on of the knowledge of planting to future generations. In that sense the seed jars represent vessels of hope.

Conclusion

Out of a complicated backstory of growing up in a visibly colonial social system marked by inequality and segregation, as well as an interest in social justice and environmental concerns, grew my desire to know more about the role Mennonite settlers have played in the dispossession of indigenous peoples and the environmental impact of their agricultural practices. I see art as an important tool to inspire dialogue, through which “‘matters of fact’ produced by the sciences, become ‘matters of concern’ for new publics and constituencies.”²⁵ I hope that my work might inspire viewers to see their world differently, and even generate a kind of “redemption [that] can come only through a revision of thought.”²⁶ I hope it might challenge us to wonder in what ways we are complicit in some of the problems it represents and how they could possibly be solved. While my research and imagery pertain to a specific region in South America, the issues I address are global ones, and also lend themselves to comparison with Canada’s—and more specifically Canadian Mennonite—colonial heritage and agricultural practices.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Manitoba Arts Council, the Alberta Arts Council, the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Alberta, and SSHRC (the Social Sciences and Humanities Re-

search Council) for funding the creation of the body of work *disPOSSESSION*.

Notes

- ¹ To view artworks described in the text, please visit my website: www.miriamrudolph.com
- ² “Paraguay extends Zero Deforestation Law to 2018,” WWF, September 3, 2013, <https://wwf.panda.org/?210224/Paraguay-extends-Zero-Deforestation-Law-to-2018>.
- ³ Trevor Herriot, *Grass, Sky, Song: Promise and Peril in the World of Grassland Birds* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2009), 226, quoted in Roger Epp, “What is the ‘Settler Problem?’” *Conrad Grebel Review* 30:2 (2012), 124.
- ⁴ Epp, 124.
- ⁵ Marcos Moreno and Verena Regehr, *Marcos Nujach’e Moreno: Coque Yimonlhajayash – Testimonio de mi Vida y de Mis Pensamientos* (Asunción: Centro de Estudios Antropológicos de las Universidad Católica, 2013), 142.
- ⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, “The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism,” in *Hungry for Profit: The Agribusiness Threat to Farmers, Food, and the Environment*, ed. Fred Magdoff, John Bellamy Foster, and Frederick Buttel (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 33.
- ⁷ Suzanne Grant, “Fences, Pathways and a Peripatetic Sense of Community,” in *Landscapes Beyond Land: Routes Aesthetics, Narratives*, ed. Arnar Árnason et al. (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 67–82.
- ⁸ Miguel Lovera, “The Environmental and Social Impacts of Unsustainable Livestock Farming and Soybean Production in Paraguay: A Case Study (Asunción: Centro de Estudios e Investigaciones de Derecho Rural y Reforma Agraria, Universidad Católica, 2014), 2, https://globalforest-coalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/paraguay_case_study_final-compressed-1.pdf.
- ⁹ Laureen Elgert, “‘More Soy on Fewer Farms’ in Paraguay: Challenging Neoliberal Agriculture’s Claim to Sustainability,” *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 43:2 (2016): 550.
- ¹⁰ Simon Romero, “Vast Tracts in Paraguay Forest Being Replaced by Ranches,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2012.
- ¹¹ Miguel Lovera, “Negocio Insustentable Que Mantiene La Inequidad,” in *Con la Soja al Cuello: Informe sobre Agronegocios en Paraguay 2013–2015*, ed. Marielle Palau (Asunción: BASE investigacions sociales, 2015), 39.
- ¹² Marielle Palau, “Presentación,” in *Con la Soja al Cuello*, 9.
- ¹³ Jorge Villalba Digalo, “Agronegocios e Impuestos: Cuánto Pagan Efectivamente?,” in *Con la Soja al Cuello*, 20–21.
- ¹⁴ Guillermo Ortega, “Agua ‘Virtual’, Producción Agrícola y Ganadera,” in *Con la Soja al Cuello*, 53.
- ¹⁵ Soy is the largest export product in the country with 4,856,121 tons in 2014, compared with 462,145 tons of beef in 2015. However, in terms of surface, cattle ranching used more than 17,685,000 hectares (2008), while soy production used 3,264,480 hectares (2015). Since 2008, beef production has increased. See Arantxa Guereña and Luis Rojas Villagra, *Yvy Jára: Los Dueños de la Tierra en Paraguay* (Asunción: Oxfam, 2016), 22–23.

- ¹⁶ Ortega, "Agua 'Virtual', Producción Agrícola y Ganadera," 50.
- ¹⁷ Lovera, *Environmental and Social Impacts*, 2; Elgert, "More Soy on Fewer Farms," 551.
- ¹⁸ Walden Bello and Maria Baviera, "Capitalist Agriculture, the Food Price Crisis and Peasant Resistance," in *Food Sovereignty: Reconnecting Food, Nature and Community*, ed. Hannah Wittman, Annette Aurélie Desmarais, and Nettie Wiebe (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2010), 72.
- ¹⁹ Bello and Baviera, 71.
- ²⁰ The Enlhet are one of twelve indigenous nations that live in the Paraguayan Chaco. Until the 1930s they had hardly any contact with non-indigenous peoples. See Hannes Kalisch, Ernesto Unruh, *Wie schön ist deine Stimme: Berichte der Enhlet in Paraguay zu ihrer Geschichte* (Asunción: Centro de Artes Visuales/Museo del Barro, 2014), 7.
- ²¹ Kalisch and Unruh, 219.
- ²² Kalisch and Unruh, 222–225.
- ²³ Elgert, "More Soy on Fewer Farms," 539.
- ²⁴ Interviews with inhabitants of the settlement Cayin o Clim, May 2015.
- ²⁵ Yates McKee, "Art History, Ecocriticism, and the Ends of Man," *Oxford Art Journal* 34:1 (2011): 126.
- ²⁶ Mark Andrew White, "Alexander Hogue's Passion: Ecology and Agribusiness in *The Crucified Land*," *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, ed. Alan C. Braddock & Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 184.