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OUR ANCESTRIES ARE SACRED[1]

NOSSAS ANCESTRALIDADES SÃO SAGRADAS

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Abstract
This article recounts the experience of a young Kayapó indigenous man who migrated from the Amazon rainforest to São Paulo, highlighting the challenges of belonging and the forms of racism faced in urban contexts. Through an autobiographical narrative, the text exposes the contradictions of colonial discourse: while indigenous peoples are expected to "modernize," those who access universities and technologies are questioned in their authenticity. The author describes his free childhood in Amapá, contrasting it with the hostility encountered in the metropolis—from environmental alienation to school bullying targeting his cultural traits. The account reaches its climax when describing an episode of academic racism during his Law degree, when his identity was challenged based on stereotypes. Despite assimilation pressures, the author emphasizes the importance of cultural resistance and activism, showing how he reconnected with his roots through the indigenous movement. More than a personal testimony, the text becomes a manifesto about the contemporary struggle for indigenous rights and the right to self-defined identity.
Keywords: Indigenous Identity; Urban Racism, Cultural Resistance.

Resumo
Este artigo relata a experiência de um jovem indígena Kayapó que migrou da floresta amazônica para São Paulo, destacando os desafios de pertencimento e as formas de racismo enfrentadas em contextos urbanos. Através de uma narrativa autobiográfica, o texto expõe as contradições do discurso colonial: enquanto se espera que os povos indígenas "se modernizem", aqueles que acessam universidades e tecnologias são questionados em sua autenticidade. O autor descreve sua infância livre no Amapá, contrastando com a hostilidade encontrada na metrópole - desde o estranhamento ambiental até o bullying escolar por seus traços culturais. O relato atinge seu ápice ao descrever um episódio de racismo acadêmico durante seu curso de Direito, quando sua identidade foi contestada com base em estereótipos. Apesar das pressões para assimilação, o autor reforça a importância da resistência cultural e do ativismo, mostrando como reconectou-se com suas raízes através do movimento indígena. O texto vai além de um depoimento pessoal, tornando-se um manifesto sobre a luta contemporânea pelos direitos indígenas e o direito à autodefinição identitária.
Palavras-chave: Identidade Indígena; Racismo Urbano; Resistência Cultural.

Being indigenous after the Portuguese invasion of 1500 was never easy for our ancestors, just as belonging is a challenge for us today. Living in large urban centers, in cities, and taking on roles that initially do not align with our ancestral ways creates a sense of unease within us and among non-indigenous people toward us.

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Racism, in its various forms, is constantly expressed, often in contradictory ways. The same people who argue that Indigenous peoples should embrace the modern world dismiss the belonging of our youth who are in universities, using the tools of the modern world. This time, the narrative claims that those who pursue higher education and use digital technologies are not 'real Indians.' Systematically, they seek to condemn emerging generations to the past and to cultural and biological inferiority.

Written collaboratively, infused with ancestral inspirations, the text recounts the experience of a young Indigenous man who left the forest and immersed himself in the daily life of Brazil's largest city. Within the narrative, the racism, oppression, fears, and anxieties faced by our people in social spaces far from their ancestral lands are unveiled.

This is a text that goes beyond the attempt to produce an autobiography. More than that, it is a cry for help from our peoples in the struggle for respect for our sociolinguistic diversities. It is a lesson that can contribute to the visibility of our peoples in all social spaces.

Here is the outburst:

I was born in Amapá, in the midst of the dense forest, in a place located in the far north of the country, on the banks of the great and majestic Amazon River. A Kayapó Curumim with straight black hair, known as Tatá, always full of energy, living up to the nickname inspired by the great serpent of fire, present in the stories told to me by the elders."

I spent the first years of my childhood playing on the quiet, tree-lined streets of a neighborhood along the Amazon River, alongside my cousins and other boys who lived in the area. We would have fun until late at night, playing games like *pira, peteca*, bottle cap races, running in the rain, and swimming in the abundant rivers and streams of the region, always watched over by my father and the other adults.

One of my favorite pastimes was climbing to the top of the tallest trees to pick fruits. It was a challenge to reach the highest branches, where only the birds could go. The rose apple tree in front of my house was one of my favorites because, from its top, it offered a beautiful view of the horizon, where the very blue sky met the muddy waters of the Amazon River.

In the waters of the great river, at Aturiá Beach, on Island of Santana, or in the Curiaú River, I would have fun swimming from one bank to the other amid the strong currents. I would look for trees near the shore to perform acrobatic jumps from their tops into the river. With my father, who knew those forests like the back of his hand (a true woodsman), we would hit the

trails, following the banks of large and small rivers, always observing and being observed by birds and other animals that inhabited those lands.

Roaming those long trails was perfect for collecting seeds of all kinds of colors and shapes, which later would be used to make crafts—like necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. My uncles were my teachers in this ancestral art, skilled artists in the family. Often, because the trails were flooded, some parts of the journey had to be done by canoe or boat. During those times, I would observe carefully—with great attention—the lives of the forest people who lived peacefully there, in wooden stilt houses that seemed to float on the dark, muddy waters of the Amazon, which resembled a vast freshwater sea.

At the end of the day, exhausted from so many games, I would run home looking for some good grub, which usually consisted of roasted fish served with fresh açaí (mashed in the mortar) and tapioca flour, or a large pot of fresh fish stew.

When I turned seven years old, my father, engaged in studies and activism in the forest, received a scholarship to study at one of the best universities in São Paulo, where he researched the conflicts in the Amazon. Because of this, we moved to the city of São Paulo, which felt more like a giant river of cars and buildings.

Despite my young age, I soon felt that big changes were ahead. We were stepping into a completely new way of life, entirely different from what we were used to in the forest. Arriving in the big concrete jungle was truly impactful, a place with few trees and an excessive number of grey concrete skyscrapers and the red lights of cars stuck in traffic on the streets. From the view through the small window of that plane that would land at Congonhas Airport, I was struck by those endless lines of cars on the Marginal Tietê.

In the first few days, during quick walks around the city, I had a strange feeling when I saw that grey sky and the air with an unpleasant smell. The birds' songs were barely heard, as they were constantly drowned out by the deafening noises of cars, buses, subways, and the many people rushing back and forth, seemingly invisible to one another.

The air, heavy with pollution, and the extremely fine dust made my nostrils burn, causing me severe headaches and making it hard to breathe. The majestic river that should flow through the city, spreading life and beauty from end to end, was no longer majestic and it was now agonizing in the most developed city in the country. In fact, at first glance, the Tietê River seemed more like an open-air sewer to me. The strong, unpleasant smell that lingered around

the river and the large amount of garbage there left me feeling depressed, longing for the great Amazon, with which I was familiar.

I soon realized that the cold concrete jungle was not welcoming—as expected, my father had already warned me about the new reality we would face. It was rare to see children playing in the streets; in daily life, people were always rushed and busy, hardly ever taking the time to say good morning or even offer a smile. On the contrary, the disapproving looks I got, filled with all sorts of discomfort at my presence, were constant.

At school, my typical straight, bowl-cut hair and seed-based handicrafts were not well accepted among my classmates. They became reasons for mockery, nicknames, and other explicitly racist actions, because in this new environment, the norm was standardized hair and ways of expression. I lost count of how many times I was asked to perform the so-called rain dance or how often someone tapped their mouth and told me to repeat: "Me Indian."

The accent and way of speaking typical of the Amapá region were also constant targets of offensive and humiliating jokes—things I often didn't even understand at the time. The straw and seed crafts I wore were often viewed with disdain and pejoratively labeled as objects of macumba, associated with something demonic, according to some people. Although I did not fully connect these remarks as racism back then, I could clearly feel the offense in the angry,sarcastic tone they were delivered in, always making explicit the intent to humiliate and belittle our own ways of understanding the world.

Over time, I began to feel a certain fear of revealing my origins and I tried in some way to fit into the standards imposed on me. I gave up my long hair and the seed and bird feather crafts that I loved so much. I tried my best to adopt a São Paulo accent, initially forced, which I gradually refined over time to please the people who used racism against my way of being. This continued until the end of my elementary and high school studies.

My father went to Porto Seguro to work in the training of Indigenous teachers as part of an Intercultural Indigenous Teaching Degree. I stayed in São Paulo to continue my studies, aiming to enter university in that city. However, he had already taught me, through his example, to value our ancestral traditions and fight for our rights using various tools and strategies. It was a huge challenge in my life!

After a few years, I matured and became aware of the importance of preserving my ancestry. I entered university with high hopes of finding a less oppressive environment, but

little had changed, because the disdain and discomfort from others remained the same, if not worse.I began to develop some tactics to defend myself without hiding my ancestral origins, especially in situations where I was often made to feel humiliated and coerced by the hostile rhetoric directed at me.

At first, I tried different approaches to raise awareness among those around me, but I soon realized that many had no interest in such discussions. Their racism was a choice—rooted in sheer malice. I remained focused on my goal: to study, research, draw strength from our ancestors, and contribute to the struggles of our peoples.

I've been trying my best to make the most of the academic environment and the few opportunities I am given to speak on Indigenous issues—such as the rights established in the 1988 Constitution and the enforcement and consolidation of ILO Convention 169, particularly regarding the demarcation and protection of ancestral territories. I always seize every opportunity to challenge colonialist projects and the agribusiness forces that dominate the country, often unsettling students and even some professors who are completely unaware of these issues.

In the fourth semester of my Law course, during a presentation on the land demarcation issues affecting the Guarani Mbya people living in Pico do Jaraguá—who have been suffering historical violations of their rights, this time by the construction company "Tenda"—one of my classmates, using the argument of "place of speech," questioned my right to speak on Indigenous issues, as I was not Indigenous. A bit embarrassed by the situation, I countered his question by asking him to define, from his perspective, what it meant to "be Indigenous." He then told me that "real Indians have long, straight hair, wear painted faces, live in thatched huts by the river, in the middle of the forest, not in the big city." Following that, the person sarcastically asked what kind of Indian I was, answering his own question by calling me some kind of "modern Indian," someone who carried a cellphone in my pocket, enjoyed the development of the big city, and even studied Law at a major university in São Paulo.

In the heat of the moment, faced with such explicit violence, I felt cornered and couldn't find the words to respond. But that very same day, on my way home, I thought to myself: they force us to become what we are not and constantly try to dismantle our ancestral connections. They compel us to abandon our ancestral habits and customs, imposing standards we must strictly follow in order to gain even a minimal acceptance from those who do not understand

our ancestries. And in the end, these same colonizers demand that we be exactly what they took from us.

From the teachings I received at home, with my parents, I felt the need to get involved in social movements, particularly in the Indigenous movement. In this way, I started attending meetings and protests for our rights, actively participating in major mobilizations in São Paulo over the past few years.

The violence that seeks to silence us has never been effective in carrying out the project of extermination of our peoples. The watchword is resistance, re-existence, and so we follow the paths and the lights left by our ancestors, not without losses, nor without negotiations and mediations.

Thanks to the Spirits of the warriors and warrior women, we have not abandoned our traditions and knowledge. On the contrary, when the colonizing world believes we have given up our identities, we rise again like a hummingbird that flies serenely, or like a jequitibá tree full of life, attuned to the symbiosis with other plant species and the presence of dozens of other forms of life.