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# Refusing 'bare life' – Belo Monte, the riverine population and their struggle for epistemic justice

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## Abstract

The installation of the hydroelectric power plant Belo Monte in the Brazilian Amazon displaced more than 40,000 people, among them numerous riverine families who were not recognized as such. Their displacement resulted in the loss of their territory and the forced abandonment of their way of life. Struggling against their precarization and for recognition, affected riverine people founded a Riverine Council as a political body through which they organized themselves and reclaimed interpretative power over their 'being riverine'. Discovering the category of traditional people as a legal shell to introduce their epistemic and ontological perspectives, they tried to force the state and the construction consortium to recognize their rights, guarantee access to their territories and, hence, compensate for environmental injustices. This paper focuses on the epistemic dimension both within the installation of Belo Monte and within the resistance struggle of the riverine population. For this purpose, we use a decolonial framing of Agamben's (2002; 2005) perspective on the state of exception and the assignment of bare life that considers the epistemic character of the coloniality of power working within (see Mignolo 2005; Quijano 2009). This forms the basis for the occurrence of epistemic injustices (see Fricker 2007), which is discussed in connection with the environmental justice debate. In order to shed more light on the mechanisms of the production of disposable and bare life and the possibilities of resistance within the struggle for epistemic justice, we finally add the idea of precarization and performative resistance (see Butler 2009; Butler and Athanasiou 2013).

## Zusammenfassung

Durch den Bau des Wasserkraftwerks Belo Monte im brasilianischen Amazonasgebiet wurden mehr als 40.000 Menschen vertrieben. Darunter waren zahlreiche Flussanrainer\*innen, die als solche nicht anerkannt wurden. Die Vertreibung führte zum Verlust ihres Territoriums und erzwang die Aufgabe ihrer Lebensweise. Im Kampf um Anerkennung und gegen diese Prekarisierung gründeten die betroffenen Flussanrainer\*innen als politisches Organ einen Rat, über den sie sich selbst organisierten und diskursive Macht über ihr Dasein zurückerlangten. Mittels der Rechtskategorie der traditionellen Völker versuchten sie, ihre epistemischen und ontologischen Perspektiven einzubringen und auf diese Weise den Staat und das Baukonsortium zu zwingen, ihre Rechte anzuerkennen, den Zugang zu ihren Territorien zu gewährleisten und damit Umweltungerechtigkeiten auszugleichen.

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Dieser Artikel rückt die epistemische Dimension sowohl innerhalb der Implementierung von Belo Monte als auch innerhalb des Widerstandkampfes der Flussanrainer\*innen in den Fokus. Zu diesem Zweck verwenden wir eine dekoloniale Konzeption von *Agambens* (2002; 2005) Perspektive auf den Ausnahmezustand und die Zuweisung von *bare life*, die den epistemischen Charakter der darin wirkenden *coloniality of power* berücksichtigt (siehe *Mignolo* 2005; *Quijano* 2009). Dies bildet die Grundlage für das Auftreten epistemischer Ungerechtigkeiten (siehe *Fricker* 2007), die im Zusammenhang mit der Debatte um Umweltgerechtigkeit diskutiert werden. Um die Mechanismen der Produktion von *disposable* und *bare life* und die Möglichkeiten des Widerstands im Kampf um epistemische Gerechtigkeit herauszustellen, fügen wir schließlich die Idee der Prekarisierung und des performativen Widerstands hinzu (siehe *Butler* 2009; *Butler* und *Athanasiou* 2013).

**Keywords** bare life, epistemic injustice, environmental justice, riverine people, Belo Monte dam

## 1. Introduction

The interaction of traditional peoples with large infrastructure projects in the Amazon has historically been marked by the violation of rights, the occurrence of environmental injustices, the invisibility of affected social groups, the loss of territories and the disappearance of traditional ways of life (*CNDH* 2015; *Chaves* 2019). In this context, the construction of the hydroelectric power plant Belo Monte on the Xingu River, close to the city of Altamira in the Brazilian Amazon, is emblematic, especially when we analyze the affected riverine population (*ribeirinhos*). Despite accounting for a considerable proportion of the affected population, the riverine people remained invisible for a long time. Although these people practiced a historically rooted way of life based on a dual housing model, small-scale agriculture and artisanal fishery, neither the project's legal framework nor the construction consortium recognized the group as traditional people entitled to special treatment. Only the riverine's search for political and legal assistance and a subsequent on-site study involving important public institutions in the final stage of dispossession and resettlement unveiled their precarization. This initiated a process of political formation and resistance that led to the foundation of a Riverine Council and their appropriation of the legal category of 'traditional people'.

The case of the riverine people highlights the epistemic dimension of that conflict. This paper investigates, first, the roots and the occurrences of epistemic injustices in the context of the implementation of the Belo Monte power plant. Second, it analyses the struggle of the riverine population for recognition and epistemic justice. Recent literature about development-forced displacement and resettlement has highlighted the

disastrous effects of mis- or non-recognition of local ways of life and according failed resettlement (see *Wet* 2006; *Oliver-Smith* 2009; *Satiroglu* and *Choi* 2015; *Cunha* and *Magalhães* 2017; *Cernea* and *Maldonado* 2018; *Rogers* and *Wilmsen* 2019). The approach of *accumulation by extra-economic means* (see *Levien* 2012; *Hall* 2013) suggests that this often results from intentional interventions by state actors that use misrecognition, fraud and even physical violence to enforce the implementation of large-scale projects. However, little has been written about the epistemic character of such conflicts. Environmental justice literature offers possible links as it investigates forms of institutional racism that are behind, for instance, the loss of people's territory and resource access, thereby shedding light on the marginalization of subaltern voices and knowledge (see *Schlosberg* 2007; *Leroy* 2011; *Walker* 2012).

Along these lines, this paper aims to contribute to an analytical framework that offers better ways to investigate the epistemic roots of such political interventions in the context of large-scale development projects and to analyze possibilities of resistance. For this purpose, we elaborate a decolonial framing of *Agamben's* (2002; 2005) state of exception and bare life that considers the epistemic dimension of the coloniality of power working within. In connection with the debate around environmental justice, we finally introduce the idea of precarization and performative resistance (see *Butler* 2009; *Butler* and *Athanasiou* 2013). This perspective sheds more light on the mechanisms of the production of disposable and bare life and the possibilities of resistance that attack its structural roots. Our conceptual approach will then be applied to the case study regarding, first, the precarizing politics of non-recognition that assigned the status of bare life to the riverine people and, second, their struggle against this assignment and for epistemic justice.

## 2. A decolonial perspective on bare life, epistemic injustice and resistance

We begin this conceptual section by outlining *Agamben's* (2002; 2005) perspective on the state of exception and bare life and complementing it with important decolonial critiques. Linking it with debates around environmental and epistemic (in)justice, we then add the idea of precarization that follows the assignment of bare life. Finally, we investigate possibilities of performative resistance.

According to *Agamben* (2002; 2005), the State, as a sovereign entity, is responsible for the distribution of political inclusion (citizenship) and exclusion of its inhabitants. Despite the universality of rights and the law, both those from within – recognized as political subjects – and those from outside – imprisoned in zones of exception – coexist in the legal system. For those from outside, the banished, remains the bare life: a biological existence, empty of rights, the most extreme version of which would be the Nazi concentration camps. Therefore, the state of exception configures “a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations [...] are deactivated” (*Agamben* 2005: 50). *Agamben's* perspective offers an interesting analytical basis from which to consider the implementation of large-scale projects. When referring to the Global South, however, *Quijano* (2009) and *Mignolo* (2005; 2009) argue for a decolonial perspective. The authors identify a coloniality of power, which structures a society that despises and dehumanizes for the purpose of propagating the Western capitalist ideal of modernity. This coloniality emerges as one of the fundamental elements of the patterns of capitalist and geopolitical power. It is sustained by the Eurocentric classification of the world's population into racial/ethnic, gender and labor categories and the “epistemic silences of Western epistemology” (*Mignolo* 2009: 4) – that is, the proclaimed objectivity and universality of Western knowledge. *Quijano* (2009) and *Mignolo* (2005; 2009) identify this coloniality as the base of the production of banishment and bare life, assigning those outside the Western capitalist standard as inferior, primitive, of no value or humanity (*Chaves* 2019).

In Brazil, the State's economic and development policy, elite economic activity and the underlying land tenure system perpetuate the coloniality of power and its inherent excluding and racist logics. Thus, structures are maintained that dehumanize social groups.

This is particularly striking in the case of the Amazon. The ventures for appropriation of the traditionally occupied territories, sometimes declared, sometimes dressed up in development policies, treat traditional peoples as archaic and primitive. Overcoming such traditional ways of life and integrating these peoples and their territories into national capitalism is viewed as inherent to the march of progress. As illustrated in our example of the riverine people and the Belo Monte dam, this opens up paths in which the suppression of ways of life transforms these people who used to own their means of survival into poor workers, thereby making available their work force and facilitating the exploitation of their territories (*Chaves* 2019).

The loss of people's territories and resource access because of capitalist expansion through, for instance, development projects resonates with the discussion around environmental (in)justice. This includes consideration of the socio-spatially uneven distribution of environmental risks, goods and bads as well as resource access, the demand for participation in environmental politics and aspects of sociocultural recognition. The debate asks to what extent the disproportionate impact of subaltern groups is intentional and can be traced back to institutional and structural racism (see *Schlosberg* 2007; *Walker* 2012; *De Almeida* 2019). According to *Acselrad* (2010: 110), the environmental justice movement “identifies the unequal exposure to risk as a result of a logic that makes the accumulation of wealth occur on the basis of the environmental penalty of the most dispossessed”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the movement triggered the “resignification of the environmental issue”, which became appropriated “by socio-political dynamics traditionally involved in the construction of social justice” (*ibid.*: 108). As discussed in the Brazilian environmental justice debate, the spatial invasion of capitalist forms of economic exchange causes processes of deterritorialization: the disruption of relationships and practices up to the separation of people from their territory and their assimilation into the capitalist system as, for instance, wage workers (see *Haesbaert* 2004; *Cavedon* and *Vieira* 2011; *Leroy* 2011). In the context of large-scale development projects, environmental injustices are often rooted in broader conditions of epistemic injustice (*Fricker* 2007) – a key mechanism within the coloniality of power (see *Alcoff* 2017). *Fricker* (2007) distinguishes between two forms of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a listener does not believe or ascribes less importance to a speaker because of social prejudices against her social or ethnic

affiliation. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when there is no generally accepted concept that frames these occurrences as wrong or unjust. This often results from the hermeneutic marginalization of certain sections of society, which hinders them from transferring their concepts equally and without prejudice into collective knowledge. Accordingly, a capitalist development project is rooted in a universalized Western epistemology that marginalizes alternative concepts or readings of the world (hermeneutical marginalization) and therefore might be unable to comprehend the suppression of alternative ways of life as injustices (hermeneutical injustice). This often leads to testimonial injustices, as alternative knowledge and its bearers are inferiorized and their opinions and worldviews are treated as less important or invalid (*ibid.*; see also Santos 2011). The demand for epistemic recognition and justice thus often makes up a crucial dimension of the struggle of people affected by development projects.

Such forms of epistemic and ontological dominance that lead to environmental injustices can be meaningfully framed with a decolonial reading of Agamben (2002; 2005). At this point, we want to add Butler and Athanasiou's (2013) understanding of precarization as it, first, sheds more light on the mechanisms of the production of disposable and bare life and, second, discovers possibilities of resistance that are able to attack its structural roots. According to the authors, in processes of displacement and capitalist reterritorialization, non-complying people, ways of life and worldviews are rendered unintelligible and put outside legal and social recognition. They are banished to their hegemonically assigned "proper places" (*ibid.*: 19), in the sense of both a spatial displacement and a social marginalization to a status of disposability (Weißermeil 2020). Resembling Mbembe's (2003) *necropolitics* as a colonial relationship of control and defining "who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (*ibid.*: 27), such precarizing politics form the basis for assignments of bare life. Dispossession thus operates "as an authoritative and often paternalistic apparatus of controlling and appropriating the spatiality, mobility, affectivity, potentiality, and relationality of (neo-)colonized subjects" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 11). It becomes "not only a problem of land deprivation but also a problem of subjective and epistemic violence" (*ibid.*: 26). The precarization of subjects excludes them from the public sphere, often leading to their invisibilization (see Gordillo and Hirsch 2003). However, and this is an important complement to Agamben's bare life, Butler and Athanasiou

(2013) and Butler (2009) acknowledge the still existing agency of precarized subjects. Agency, though, is faced with a dilemma. In order to be comprehensible, resistance practices need to refer to intelligible norms and categories, which, in the Global South, are mostly of colonial origin. When, for instance, claiming legal rights, subaltern people bear the risk of assimilating into and confirming the juridical structures that are rooted in their colonial and ongoing "effacement and exploitation" (Butler 2009: x). Instead of demanding recognition, Mignolo (2009) therefore argues for epistemic disobedience. This means the intentional instrumentalization or breach of intelligible norms that are based on Western epistemology in order to cause ruptures, re-establish established conventions and thus performatively generate shifts in meaning. It resonates with Butler's (2009) argument that when precarized people publically demand their ontological and epistemic validity and their right to exist outside their assigned 'proper places', they already performatively demonstrate and practice their public existence. When facing dispossession, the refusal to leave one's place in order to take the assigned place can involve an act of "radical reterritorialization" (*ibid.*: 21). Although Butler (2009) remains skeptical towards subaltern people's reference to legal rights, the appropriation and instrumentalization of minority rights can represent a way to build on the past struggles of subaltern groups and to visibilize their particularities and society's diversity, as we will see in the example of the riverine people.

In Brazil, development politics cannot be understood without considering the post- or neocolonial context. Therefore, we introduced a decolonial framing of Agamben's state of exception and bare life. This framing considers the epistemic dimension and is a helpful tool for analyzing the trajectory of development politics and its sacrifices of certain social groups. The concept of precarization takes up the profound psychosocial effect of such politics and the subject's resultant deterritorialization. However, it suggests a limited but decisive possibility of agency in the sense of Mignolo's (2009) epistemic disobedience and can thus be an important tool with which to analyze resistance against the assignment of bare life.

### 3. Methods

Both authors have carried out long-term research in Altamira and the Xingu region. Sören undertook field

research as part of his PhD-project in the years 2013-2018 with a total stay of 12 months in Altamira. Kena has regularly visited Altamira and its surroundings, from 2014 on as a researcher for the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, and since 2018 as part of her PhD-project. The empirics comprised informal talks, narrative interviews, group discussions, the organization of workshops and visits to resettlements and areas affected by the hydroelectric plant. This was complemented by document analysis and regular participation in public gatherings and other political and administrative meetings, including political protest. Research was thus mainly qualitative and based on living on-site and everyday interactions with affected people and social movement activists. This enabled a good insight into processes of meaning construction, the complex forms of how people were affected by the Belo Monte project and how they perceived these impacts.

#### 4. Belo Monte and the precarization of the riverine population

Once completed, Belo Monte will be the fourth biggest hydroelectric plant in the world with an installed capacity of 11,233 MW and an average annual generation of 4,571 MW (see Siffert et al. 2014). Construction began after obtaining the installation license in 2011 and displacement and resettlement mainly occurred between 2013 and 2015. The plant has been partially in operation since May 2016 (Norte Energia S.A. 2019; see Fearnside 2017a). The reservoir encompasses 50,300 ha and affects the shores and islands of the Xingu River as well as approximately one third of the nearby city of Altamira (see Fig. 1; Centrais Hidrelétricas Brasileiras S.A. 2009: 41; MAB 2015: 109f.). The inundation of the shores, the islands and the urban area particularly affected the residences of riverine people (see Fearnside 2017b).

The licensing procedure and construction of Belo Monte (between 2005 and 2015) were marked by protests and lawsuits following the non-fulfillment of constitutional requirements like public consultations or infrastructural preparations (see Fearnside 2017b); the repeated revocation of the license; and the annulment of these judicial decisions thanks to the *suspensão de segurança*, a statute from the military dictatorship that allows the relevant higher court to withdraw a suspension decision in cases of “manifest public interest” (Presidência da República 1992, art. 15; see

Hochstetler 2011). Applying Agamben's perspective on the state of exception, this public interest, which was motivated by the imperative of development and increased energy demands, can be understood as a generalization applied by the State to justify the implementation of the plant and to circumvent constitutional regulations and rights. Following Calvert (2001: 51), these politics that further the development and exploitation of the Amazon while subjecting the local population, can be designated as politics of “internal colonisation”.

The imposition of these interests around the project indicates a coloniality of power, based on a Western modernist order that silenced the perspectives of different affected groups and non-recognized their alternative ways of life and specificities. In the region around Altamira, Belo Monte was advertised as the arrival of development, modernity and quality of life, particularly related to the new urban neighborhoods that would be constructed for the expropriated people. These were contrasted to the affected neighborhoods in the lower part of Altamira, the *baixão*, which were one-sidedly designated as “disorganized occupation” with a “severe shortage of infrastructure and effluent disposal” (Norte Energia S.A. 2010, Vol.1: 381f.). They were to be removed in order to advance the “urban restructuring of the city of Altamira” (*ibid.*). The collision between Western modernist and alternative values is particularly apparent in the example of the riverine people. In order to understand their invisibilization and following precarization we need to take a closer look at their sociocultural and economic patterns. Prior to Belo Monte, the riverine people adopted a dual housing model that consisted of both a rural and an urban settlement (see Francesco et al. 2016). Thus, they combined the activities of extractivism, fishery and small-scale agriculture in the *beiradão* – that is, their settlements on islands and along the river shore – with the sale of products and the usage of urban services in the *baixão*. The daily practices, routines and rules and the resultant relations and mobilities between the *beiradão* and the *baixão* produced territorialities – i.e., the capability to wield control and influence over a geographic area (see Haesbaert 2004: 86-87) – that were based on structures of mutual recognition and an understanding of territory as a complex, complementary system of human and non-human actors and the riverines' specific knowledge. Designations like the forest being “a mother” and the river being “a father” or “a comrade” were expressions of a different ontology that

assigned a certain being-in-the-world to humans, the river or plants (e.g. I\_02.03.15<sup>2</sup> and PO\_29.09.15; see *Dunker and Katz 2017; Weißermel 2019*). The *baixão* neighborhoods had grown according to the dwellers' needs and were products of an integrated and mutual relation with the Xingu River, the region of the Middle Xingu and the Transamazon Highway. While they had largely been constructed without formal ownership assignments, the rural settlements on the islands and river shore were formalized by a federal concession that recognized the inhabitants as riverine and, hence, traditional people. This allowed them the sustainable use of the resources available on the islands, riverbanks and river course (*Presidência da República 2007*). According to legislation, this status as traditional people involves the right to prior consultation and the elaboration of a specific program of resettlement in order to allow their socioeconomic and cultural reproduction (*ibid.*).

However, neither the legal and planning contract nor the construction consortium Norte Energia recognized a local riverine population and its status as traditional people. As the riverine people were not differentiated but received the standard treatment, they had the option of either urban or rural resettlement with only financial compensation for the remaining residence. As rural resettlement options involved distant locations from both the city and the future reservoir with mostly infertile land, most riverines felt compelled to choose the urban option (e.g. I\_04.03.15; I\_02.03.15; PO\_30.09.15). The new urban settlements, however, were located four to six kilometers away from the river shore and forced them to give up fishery and agricultural production (see *Palmquist 2015; PO\_30.09.15; PO\_27.09.18*). The obligation to decide resulted in the "transformation of the riverine population into an exclusively urban or agricultural population" (*ISA 2015: 13*).

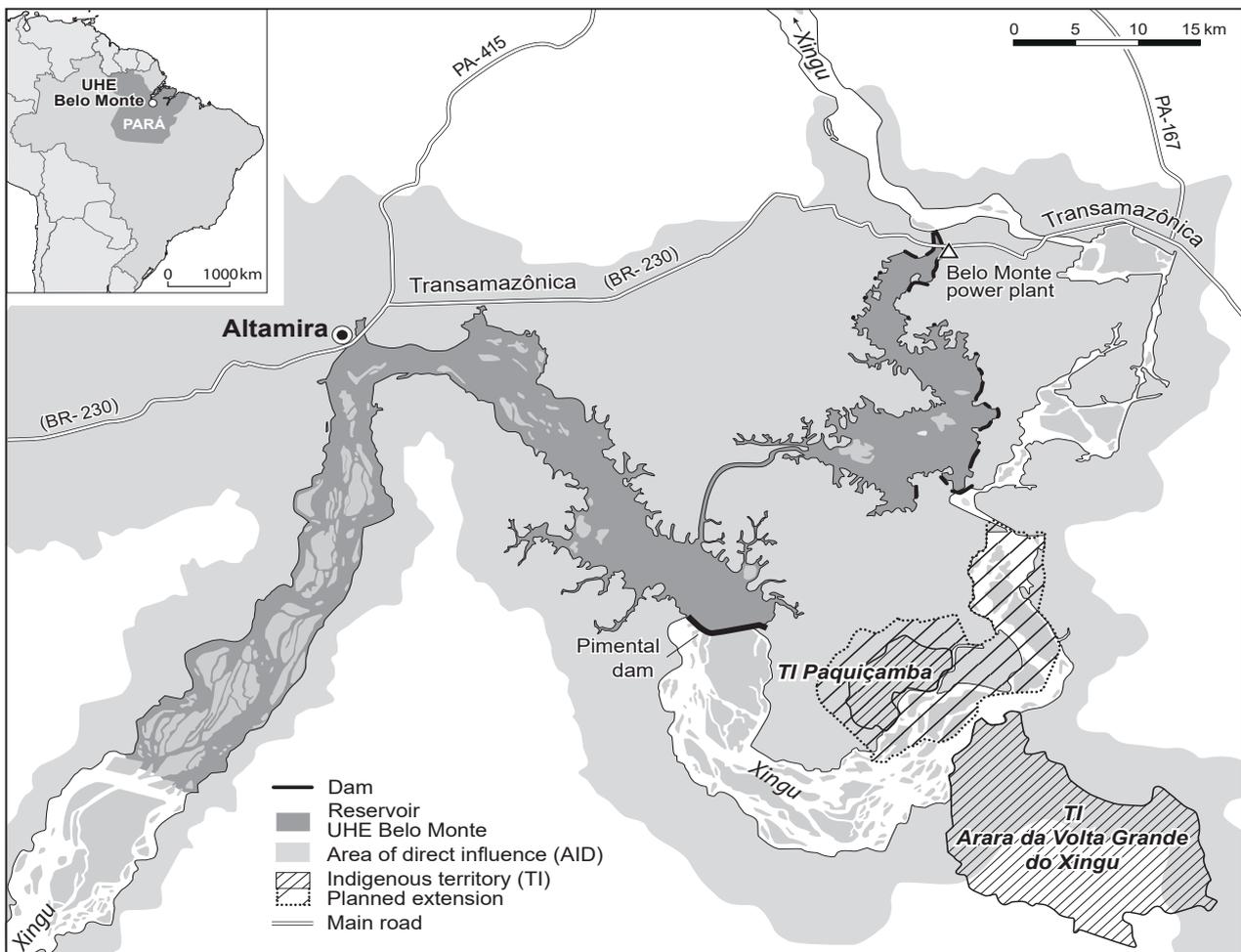


Fig. 1 The Belo Monte power plant complex. The river is dammed by the main dam (Pimental) and redirected via artificial channels to the Belo Monte power plant. Source: own elaboration based on ISA 2013: 46-47

This case of non-recognition is emblematic for the epistemic dimension of the coloniality of power inherent in the Belo Monte project. The incorporation of the reality and the perspectives of the riverine people contradicted the project's capitalist framework. For the purpose of capitalist spatial appropriation, the territorialities of the riverine people and the particularities of their way of life – such as, for instance, the dual housing model – were neglected or rendered unintelligible (see *CNDH* 2015). This hermeneutical marginalization resulted in testimonial injustices, as the riverine people were not believed or simply assigned the inability to process valid knowledge (see *Friccker* 2007). This was apparent in an emblematic case in 2015, when complaints about the declining fish populations resulting from construction works and any future discussion of the issue were dismissed by a technical study commissioned by Norte Energia (*Norte Energia S.A.* 2015). The devaluation of their knowledge was essential to the riverine people's banishment to a condition of bare and disposable life in their marginal "proper places" (*Butler and Athanasiou* 2013: 19) on the Transamazon Highway or in Altamira's urban outskirts. The consequences of this non-recognition and the resultant transformation and deterritorialization manifested themselves in serious psychological harm like resignation, depression and apathy, and in several cases affected the cardiovascular system (T\_22.11.14; T\_30.09.15; see *Katz and Oliveira* 2016). One inhabitant designated a newly constructed neighborhood for former riverine people in the outskirts of Altamira as a "neighborhood of ghosts" (T\_30.09.15; see *Weißermel* 2020). In mid-2015 the displacement procedure culminated in the burning of several abodes in the *beiradão* that belonged to riverine people who refused to leave. One affected inhabitant described the consequences with: "they have destroyed everyone, everyone died" (T\_30.09.15). Dispossession thus caused a process of precarization, which is reflected in the words of a 65-year-old riverine who said that in spite of months of fighting he experienced the "disrespect" of the burning of his house on the island and the feeling that "my words don't mean anything". As a consequence, he cannot fight anymore: "it has all finished" (Inf\_30.09.15). These riverine experiences of epistemic injustice confirm *Butler and Athanasiou's* (2013: 26) assessment of dispossession as "a problem of subjective and epistemic violence".

### 5. The struggle against bare life and the project of resettlement

In the following, we analyze the resistance of the affected riverine people as a refusal to accept their banishment to a status of bare life and their 'proper places'. This resistance developed through two momentums: first, the riverines' public demonstration of their sociocultural and economic particularities and their subsequent visibilization; and, second, the foundation of the Riverine Council and the resulting production of a collective political identity and appropriation of the legal category of 'traditional people'.

Within the conflict around Belo Monte, the riverine people remained publically invisible for a long time, despite their cultural and economic influence in the Xingu region. This resulted, on the one hand, from the above-mentioned invisibilization caused by the project's underlying coloniality of power and Norte Energia's fragmenting and individualized displacement procedure (see *Weißermel* 2017). On the other hand, (trans-)national NGOs and local social movements focused their activism on the medially effective indigenous population, in some cases unaware of the riverine struggle, as confirmed by local activists (Inf\_01.03.15; I\_07.10.15). Since mid-2014, however, riverine people began to consult Altamira's public prosecution department (*Ministério Público Federal – MPF*) and the Xingu Forever Alive Movement (*Xingu Vivo*). Gradually, they made their case apparent to state actors and civil society. Finally, the MPF organized an inter-institutional group<sup>3</sup> that conducted an on-site study in June 2015 in order to visit the riverines' places and listen to their reports. A hermeneutical injustice came to the fore, namely the unintelligibility or ignorance of the riverine dual housing practice, which had existed for decades but then disappeared from public visibility with the arrival of Belo Monte. The revealing of this housing model, the consequences of its destruction and the loss of resource access forced the licensor Ibama (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) to make the consortium temporarily stop the process of displacement, formally acknowledge the riverines' dual housing and revise their cases by offering the riverines a second residence with access to the Xingu River.

A public meeting in September 2015 (PO\_29.09.15) with the participation of all relevant actors and institutions, including Norte Energia, was supposed to show a map to the riverine people, thus presenting a

state proposal for the reoccupation of the island's future remaining surfaces (Fig. 2). The riverine people, however, redefined the meeting as a space in which to demonstrate the variety of environmental injustices they had suffered. Through their numerous speeches and conflictual interaction with the present authorities they made it a space of appearance of their epistemic and ontological perspectives. Alongside accounts of the menaces that had induced them to agree to the consortium's compensation, the cases of the burnt houses in the *beiradão* attracted most attention. Through the riverines' narratives, the burnt houses were highlighted as violent responses to their staying-in-place and performatively emerged as symbols of their wider experience of repression, lawlessness and bare life:

[a]s the way my dad was deceived, massacred, and everything he had there was burnt, without the right to save them! [...] Oh, many people here who were removed from these places [...] it is not just a part of them what was removed. What was removed was the life of these *senhores*. (Riverine's daughter, PO\_29.09.15)

In numerous statements and speeches, the riverines outlined an alternative concept of territory based not on domination and control but on community, respect and the integrated interaction of human and non-human beings. By demonstrating their knowledge about the different fish species and the river's characteristics they tried to overcome their hermeneutical marginalization. By insisting on the validity of their knowledge, the riverine people challenged the testimonial injustice of Norte Energia's claim that fishery was not affected by the dam's construction. They criticized the map presented to them (Fig. 2) for being abstract and incomprehensible, for disconsidering structures of former riverine residences and existing big landowners, and for demarking as dry land areas which they knew were flooded during the high river season. Exclamations like "I have knowledge for you!" or "Do you understand?" resonate with *Mignolo's* (2009) epistemic disobedience as they were not merely aimed at epistemic recognition. Set against the authorities' theoretical and functionalist perspective and their claim of epistemic supremacy, the riverines presented their ontological and epistemic perspective as the only valid one in this specific context and thus claimed their legitimate authority over the territory.

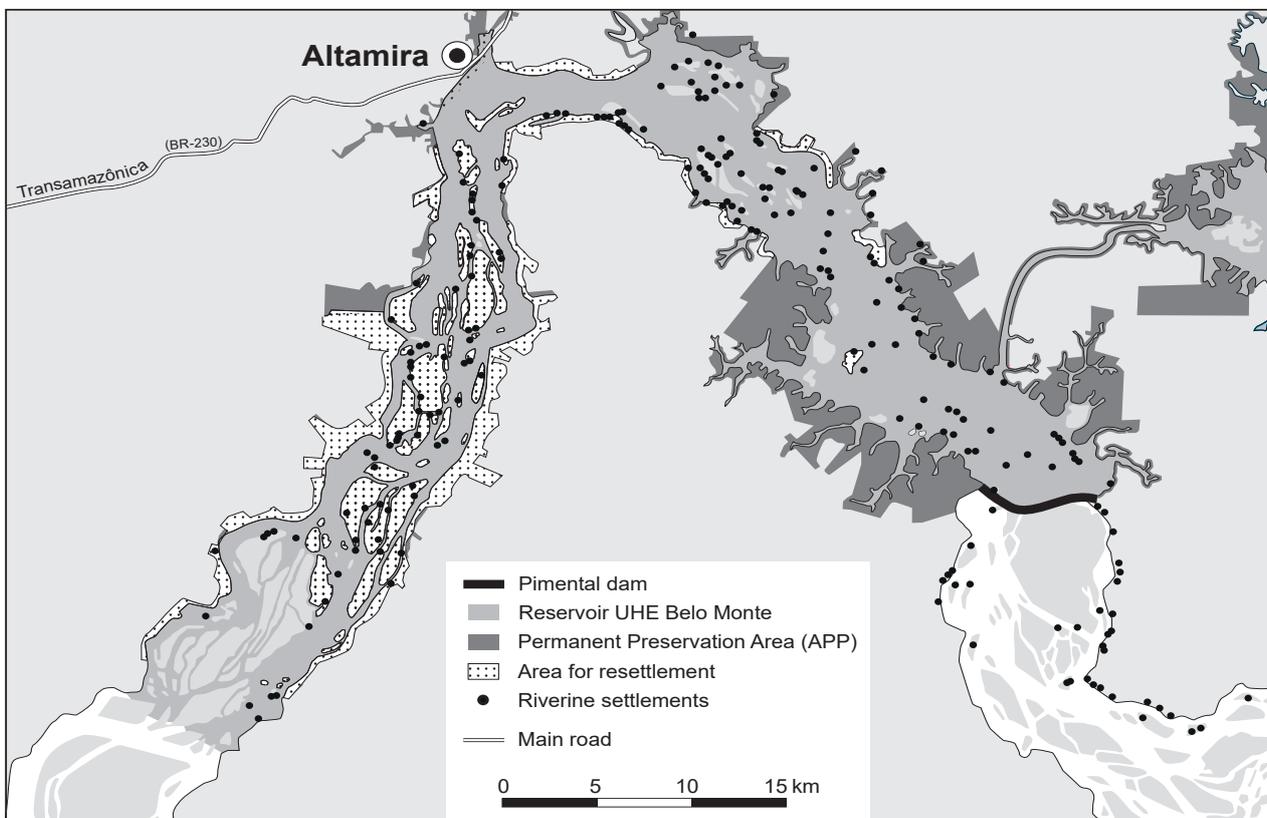


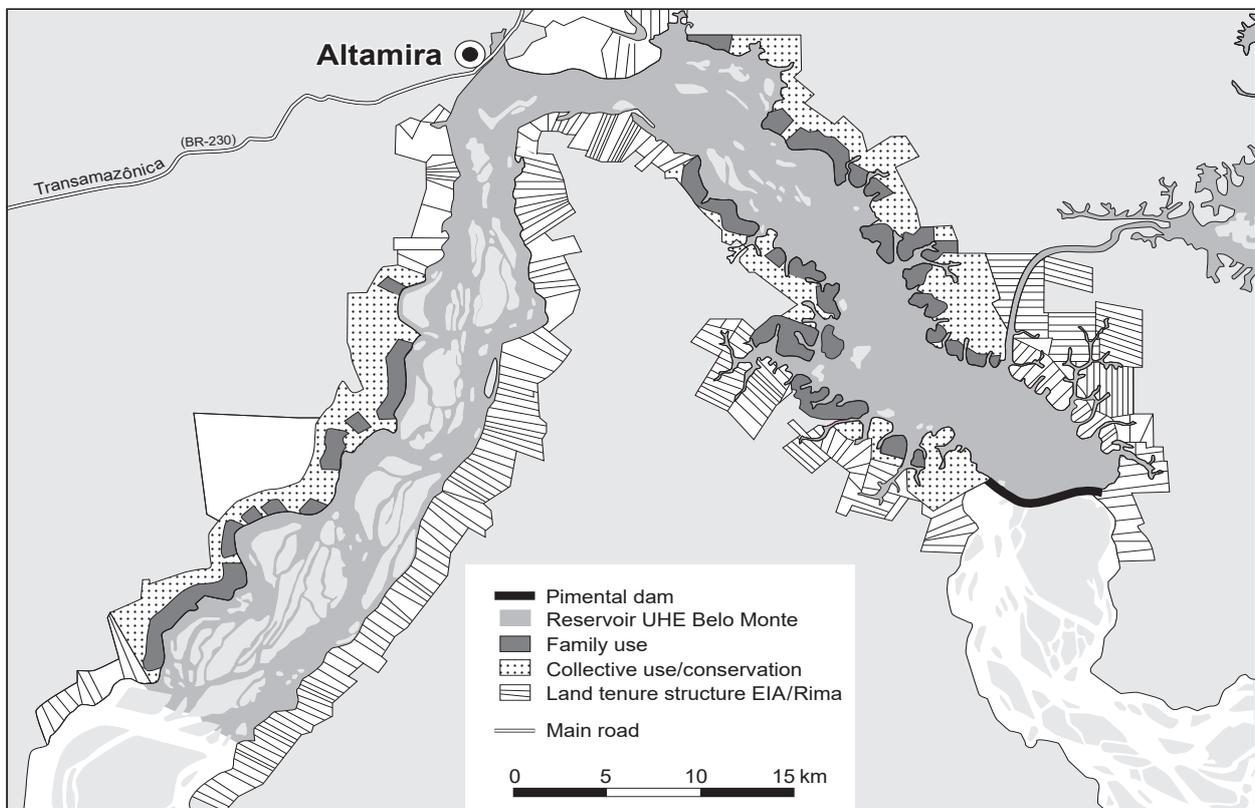
Fig. 2 State map of proposal for the reoccupation of the island's future remaining surfaces. Source: own elaboration based on SPU 2015: s.p

## Refusing 'bare life' – Belo Monte, the riverine population and their struggle for epistemic justice

Positioning themselves as relevant actors with historical spatial knowledge and agency and a consequent right to their territory involved an act of performative resistance against their assignment to a condition of bare life and the immanent epistemic injustice. In order to overcome their hermeneutical marginalization, a group of riverine representatives formed a working group to elaborate reoccupation criteria and directly participate in the design of the resettlement project. A technical group of state and private actors who were involved in the Belo Monte project as well as civil society representatives was intended to enable circuits of so-called riverine dialogues that would lead to the successful realization of the resettlement. However, in early 2016 severe irregularities in Norte Energia's resettlement procedure came to the fore, revealing the ongoing occurrence of testimonial injustices. The riverines' criteria were ignored as several self-defined riverine people were excluded. Initial reoccupations were undertaken that disregarded past residential structures and soil adequacy, resulting in the fragmentation of family networks, in conflicts with big landowners, and in disputes around agricultural yields between former and new residents (see *Grupo de Acompanhamento Interinstitucional* 2017). Despite these irregularities

and the consequent failure of the riverine dialogues, Belo Monte began to operate in May 2016.

In order to circumvent Norte Energia's persisting epistemic domination and to ensure the requirements for the production of new territorialities, the riverine people needed an autonomous space to create a self-determined design of the resettlement project. Coordinated by the Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science (SBPC) and accompanied by the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), between September and November 2016 riverine people undertook several on-site inspections looking for adequate reoccupation areas (see *Villas-Boas et al.* 2016). A map was developed (*Fig. 3*) that differed significantly from the one presented at the meeting of September 2015. Besides the allotment for family use in areas that met riverine needs and the consideration of big landowners, the map included areas for collective use and conservation and thus considered important aspects of community life and the interaction between human and non-human beings. The results were handed over to Ibama in November 2016, and included a condition to create a Riverine Council as a recognized political body, with the competence to identify the riverine people to be resettled.



*Fig. 3* Riverine map of proposal for the reoccupation of the island's future remaining surfaces. Source: own elaboration based on SPU 2015: s.p. and Villas-Boas et al. 2016: 355

Accompanied by the MPF, ISA, Xingu Vivo and scientists, between January and March 2017 the Riverine Council held a range of meetings “with the goal of systematizing the social recognition of riverine families that lived along the river shores” (*Grupo de Acompanhamento Interinstitucional* 2017: 14). Stories of participating riverine people were condensed to a one-page definition of ‘being riverine’. This was intended to allow the elaboration of criteria not solely using the way of life but also using riverine identities, thus realizing “an extended valuation of the innumerable relations that the riverine has with his [sic!] territory” (*ibid.*). Based on this definition, the council compiled a list of riverine people with the right of resettlement. This was included in a final report and passed on to Ibama.

Through their council, the riverine people became protagonists in the design of their resettlement. This developed a decisive momentum because it involved not only assuming discursive control over the resettlement project. The council became a forum for the riverines’ mutual epistemic and ontological self-insurance, which created a common narrative that enabled the production of a collective political identity as ‘riverine people’. Growing aware of their hermeneutical marginalization, together with the inter-institutional group the council discovered the category of traditional people as a legal shell to introduce their epistemic perspective. This was notable because until then the riverine people did not necessarily identify themselves as traditional people despite the federal land-use concession. Their identity was always tied to their place of habitation: *baixão*, *beiradão*; and/or to their principal activity: fisher, extractivist, agriculturist (*Chaves* 2018). However, confronted with the consortium’s enduring epistemic dominance and the concomitant confirmation of the riverine people’s bare life condition, this legal status offered a possibility to claim a place in the community of justice despite, or rather because of, adhering to their epistemic and ontological perspectives. Thus, by relying on legislation that should guarantee economic and cultural reproduction (*Presidência da República* 2007), they aimed to render their way of life intelligible as ‘traditional’. Furthermore, this backed their claim of autonomously designing the territorial conditions of resettlement. Amid experiences of precarization, they appropriated a colonially rooted category as an instrument of legal emancipation that confirmed to them their status as subjects of justice. Apart from this legal value, among the council’s participants their actuation contributed to the esteeming understanding that, as a council

leader confirmed, “our way of life is important and must not disappear” (I\_29.09.17).

Three years after the establishment of the council, at the time of writing this paper, the self-identified families that were recognized by Ibama as affected, as riverine and, hence, as traditional people have not yet been resettled. The negotiations are being extended by the consortium who, according to members of the council, are trying to wear down the riverine people and defeat them by exhaustion (PO\_27.09.18). The delay in the resettlements attacks the achievements of the Riverine Council as it has already demobilized many riverine people and led to the fragmentation of political positions and the withdrawal of several councilors: “They [Norte Energia] hold us till the people get tired and give up” (I\_30.05.19).

## 6. Conclusions

The large-scale project Belo Monte was implemented by politics of state actors and the construction consortium. Both employed states of exception in order to circumvent constitutional rights and neglect a social heterogeneity that demanded a differentiated procedure. The project was justified and promoted with Western concepts of development, progress and regularization, was based on capitalist ideas of land use and valorization, and was implemented in a region of socio-ecological, ontological and epistemic diversity. Its implementation needs to be regarded as rooted in a coloniality of power. It resembled politics of internal colonisation and caused the precarization of people and ways of life that did not comply with Western capitalist perspectives and logics.

The riverine people were extraordinarily affected by the Belo Monte power plant and its legal exceptions. Their way of life and their realities were rendered unintelligible, thus enabling their deterritorialization and invisibilization. This involved a discursive banishment of the riverine people to bare life, the withdrawal of self-determination, self-interpretation and self-definition and their banishment to their ‘proper places’. The inferiorization and invalidation of their knowledge and their making sense of the world, deeply intertwined with their ontological perceptions of being-in-the-world, caused a process of precarization. This epistemic dimension was at the heart of the environmental injustices that occurred, like the riverines’ exposure to environmental transformation and

their loss of resource access. Following *Fricker* (2007), epistemic injustice was revealed in the riverines' hermeneutical marginalization as they were not able to introduce their experiences, perceptions and knowledge into the implementation process of Belo Monte. Constantly, testimonial injustices occurred as the riverine people were not believed or not taken seriously, until they realized that their "words don't mean anything". The burning of several settlements in the *beiradão* was emblematic for this contempt of the riverine epistemic and ontological realities.

A decolonial framing of *Agamben's* (2002; 2005) state of exception and its inherent banishment of certain groups to bare life, that is, the invalidation and suppression of non-capitalist ways of life and territorial uses, proves a meaningful base for analyzing the state's exercise of sovereignty in neo-colonized regions such as the Amazon. This conceptual perspective considers the epistemic core of the coloniality of power working within, and thus analytically addresses the very roots of environmental injustices. Finally, the approach of precarization and performative resistance takes up these entanglements and the subjective and epistemic violence inherent in development-forced processes of dispossession. While explaining the overarching psychosocial effects of such politics, it suggests limited but decisive possibilities of resistance to bare life. We argue that such a focus on the production and structural roots of epistemic injustices, their persistence and challenges is a crucial field of analysis within the environmental justice debate and an important contribution to the study of large-scale projects and development-forced displacement and resettlement.

The analytical frame proves the necessity and possible performative effects of epistemic disobedience in situations of epistemic injustice. Returning to our example, the riverines' acts of epistemic disobedience in claiming territorial authority, mutually assuring each other about their territorial values and autonomously designing the areas of resettlement were a crucial condition for the production of new territorialities. Slightly disagreeing with *Butler* (2009), the example shows that the use and appropriation of minority rights can represent an effective way to introduce marginalized epistemic and ontological perspectives and to fight for political emancipation. However, Norte Energia's reluctance to materially implement the resettlement project and constant questioning of the validity of the riverines' design shows the consortium's persisting epistemic dominance and the complexity of challenging situations of structural epistemic injustice.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All sources in Portuguese language have been translated by the authors.
- <sup>2</sup> In this paper, empirical sources are coded by type (I=interview, GC=group conversation, T=tour, Inf=informal talk, PO=participatory observation) and date.
- <sup>3</sup> Apart from scientists and social movement representatives, important public institutions participated like the National Council of Human Rights (CNDH), Ibama, FUNAI (National Indian Foundation), federal Secretary of Human Rights, Ministry of Fishery and Aquaculture, among others (MPF 2015).

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We dedicate this article to the riverine people affected by the Belo Monte hydroelectric power plant. We thank them for the interviews, for their confidence and for sharing their trajectories. We hope that their struggle will bring them a just reparation for the suffering they have experienced.

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