

Steps that Embody Places: Inhabiting Multiple Modes Of Existence

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes an ethnography of modes of care in the Cerrado of Mato Grosso based on lived experiences with the quilombola collectives of Laranjal and Morro de Cambambi. In these experiences, time and matter intertwine within a living landscape composed of plural soils—black, white, and red—that sustain singular relationships with plants, waters, stones, animals, and encantados (spiritual beings). The land is body, and places are dwellings that keep the Cerrado pulsing. In the face of collapse, forms of care emerge that challenge the centrality of the human, opening space for other flows and presences. The reflection arises from encounters that have moved through me and continue to provoke thought by destabilizing habitual ways of perceiving life and the world.

Keywords: Cerrado, Quilombo, Landscape, Care, Existence

Introduction

I would like to begin this first encounter sitting at the kitchen table with Marcela Pedroso, surrounded by the strong and welcoming smell of garlic frying in the pan—the scent of home, of shared affection, of life in motion. Among pots, voices, and everyday gestures, Marcela gently yet firmly leads me along a delicate thread: how one continues living when everything seems to have been torn from its place.

With a steady voice and eyes that carry the clarity of lived experience, she speaks of the difficult times that came with the construction of the Manso Hydroelectric Power Plant in the early 2000s, built by the state-owned company Furnas during the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso. They were years of rupture and discouragement, when the rhythm of lives was broken, familiar landscapes submerged beneath a vast and unfamiliar lake. It was not only the course of the waters that changed—it was the entire course of existence.

What was unraveling there was not only geography, but an ancestral fabric, finely woven among bodies, animals, encantados, cultivated fields, brotherhoods, and kinship ties. The wound of this loss still pulses in Marcela's body, who says, with the density of someone who has seen and felt it: "The lake came and affected everything and everyone. There were settlements

that became ghosts. Land that turned into white sand, where nothing grows anymore."

The transformation was geographical, yes, but also spiritual, sensory, and political. Agostinho José da Guia, with the gravity of someone who witnessed the forced displacements, murmurs: "Bodies were not respected—neither the living nor the dead. We were treated like cattle, relocated far from our brotherhoods. There were springs that disappeared, places that were flooded; there are many spirits in suffering, my daughter."

In another conversation, Seu Adelino Fernandes da Conceição turns time over in his eyes and offers me a landscape from before, full of presences and vitality: "Before the dam there was forest. There were lagoons along the riverbanks. It was a place for animals—tapirs, capybaras, armadillos, deer. There were native fruits—*bacuri*, *bocaiuva*, *babaçu*, *cumbaru*. And today, no—everything is gone." The landscape today is different. The dammed water has left a fractured mirror. Where abundance once existed, what now blossoms is memory. The black, fertile soil—the one that sustained fields and yards—has become rare. In its place, the *Cerradão* advances, bringing its own challenges: the loss of balance among animals—capybaras, tapirs, deer—that no longer follow their former paths; the increase of pests that attack cassava and banana crops; the prolonged drought that intensifies heat, fires, and the lack of rain. The heat presses in, and water grows ever more scarce.

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And yet, it is in this landscape of scars that Marcela looks at me with something that defies fatality. With a calm that only enchanted experience can offer, she says:

Life is hard, but there are things that happen that slip beyond our hands. Life is like our Morro do Japão. It keeps changing color. You look at it and it's blue. Then, later, you look again and it's pink, orange... My God, it's beautiful, enchanting. It's a magic of nature, it's magical. So much beauty—like colored pencils naturally happening right there before us, unfolding in front of our eyes. Life is like that: it happens and changes from one moment to the next.

In that moment, I realize that Marcela was not speaking only about the hill, but about life itself—this life that, even when wounded, insists on sprouting in the flooded grounds of loss. Her sense of enchantment does not erase the pain, but moves through it with a steady delicacy, like someone who learns to walk over deep waters. Because sometimes the impossible also blossoms. It is a beauty that insinuates itself, like color escaping into the sky—the hill that shifts its tones—enchanting and teaching us to allow ourselves to be enchanted.

If in Cambambi it is the hill that speaks and teaches, in Laranjal it is water—or its absence—that sets the tone of life. The Pantanal landscape, once guided by floods and droughts that followed a rhythm of almost ritual precision, now oscillates between extremes: sometimes too much, sometimes too little. The tanks that once stored abundance now appear shallow, revealing the cracked bottom of the earth. The animals have “lost their freedom.” And the *encantados*, silent, have been moving away, seeking other places where they may still dwell. The green of the pastures withdraws. The question echoes in the air like a prayer and a hope: will it rain? When? Enough?

Yet even in the face of uncertainty, Laranjal continues. The territory reorganizes itself through the rhythm of relationships: among families, among brotherhoods, through prayers and shared exchanges. The ties with Forquilha, Aranha, and Corcunda sustain a network of care and kinship that extends beyond the dry land—a web made of knowledge, gestures, exchanges, and affections. Time there is slowly embroidered through small gestures, visits filled with stories, walks that listen to the ground before moving forward.

In Laranjal there is a knowledge attentive to the delicacy of the world. Women, in particular, carry in their bodies the signs of land, blood, and water. They know when the wind shifts. When fire threatens to rise too soon. When it is time to gather the children. Their gestures—blessings, care for childbirth, the tending of body and spirit—sustain life even when the territory seems disordered by drought or grief.

Like Cambambi, Laranjal also speaks. It speaks through gestures, presences, and absences. It speaks through water, through fire, through footprints in the dry mud, through the attentive eyes of midwives, through the tracks of animals. And it is through this way of listening to the world that the quilombos remain standing: not only as spaces of resistance, but as living territories of knowledge, listening, and reinvention.

Perhaps what I hear from these women and from these territories—in their words, but also in their gestures and silences—is what Donna Haraway calls “making kin” in difficult times [1]. Rather than seeking a grand salvation, communities that move among the ruins of dams, droughts, or promises of progress reinvent life through bonds woven among multiple humanities, among animals, hills, *encantados*, waters, fire, and practices of care. They do not merely survive: they compose worlds, even if fractured, even if in pieces. As Haraway insists, the point is not to “stay clean” or “stay correct,” but to “stay with the trouble”—the trouble that runs through the dry beds of the tanks and through the wounded yet living bodies of the veredas of this hinterland.

These collectives are sustained not by explanation, but by care. Here, Isabelle Stengers appears as an ally: what these women do is not “apply knowledge,” but struggle against stupidity—the kind that settles in when one refuses to listen to what territories are saying, when hegemonic science silences local practices, when the time of agribusiness tramples the cycles of rains and moons. Marcela, Cristina, Maria José, Dona Joana, Dona Rosa, Dona Francisca—all of them enact what Stengers might call an “ecology of practices”: it is not about imposing a solution, but about allowing a form of knowledge to emerge that respects uncertainty, that composes with affects, bodies, and risks—and that insists on existing even where the state sees only scarcity or statistics [2].

These women are neither managers of a dead tradition nor resilient heroines. They are scientists of another world, practitioners of an embodied, affective, radically situated science—one that knows, like the hills, how to change color. And perhaps it is precisely here that their strength resides: in the capacity to be affected, to reorganize themselves with the world, to remain with what matters, even when everything seems to say that it is time to give up.

Walking as Method, Listening as a Form of Care

It is always by walking that I learn. With Enoc Miranda, a step is never just movement. It is, first of all, a gesture of attention. Enoc, known by many as a sharp-witted wanderer, teaches me that knowledge is not gathered all at once. It is like a plant that requires time, dedication, and presence. He does not speak about plants—he speaks with them. And he invites us to listen with our pores, with the body, with memory.

The Cerrado of Chapada dos Guimarães appears in Enoc's words as a great sensory laboratory. In it, each leaf has a scent, each root holds a story, and each tree carries ancestral knowledge that does not separate body from territory. Between *Quina Roxa* and *Paratudo*, *Nó de Cachorro* and *Doradinha*, a living map begins to take shape—of bodies that learn from one another: human skin, plant skin, blood, resin, and sap—all pulsing together.

Enoc speaks of herbs as one speaks of family. Babosa (aloe) calms the body; *Erva-de-Santa-Maria* protects the lungs and “removes worms from children.” *Sucupira* seeds heal the throat and strengthen immunity. And if the body aches or breaks, it is the syrup of *aroeira* that comes to mend the bone. Each plant is medicine, but also relationship. For it to heal, more than knowledge is required: there must be a bond. One must know

the time, the manner, the right way to harvest, and the way to give thanks.

With Enoc, plants speak-not only through their names and uses, but through the gestures of those who care for them, harvest them, wait, and respect them. These are technologies inseparable from time, places, lands, the body, and listening-echoing what Donna Haraway calls situated knowledge: forms of knowledge and technology that do not claim to speak “from above,” but from the ground. As he peers into the forest, Enoc points [3]: “This is Anandir. If you cut it, it cries. It’s alive.” I ask: how do you recognize that it is alive? He answers without hesitation: “Because Anandir is not alone.”

The *Anandir* is a spring-tree-when wounded, it releases water. Its sap is a tear. Body and source at the same time. It does not simply live; it sustains life around it. It is matter of relation. A being that can only be touched with attention and necessity, never by impulse. Its body teaches an ethic: to care is to know how to measure—not cutting too much nor too little, but only when the time is right, when the gesture is justified by life.

Nearby, Enoc shows the Pé de Perdiz—“poisonous, makes you cry until you go blind.” He continues pointing out others: *Cambará*, *Lixeira*, *Sapucaia*-trees with thick bark and deep roots, those that withstand fire without falling. They are bodies that hold memories of resistance. Each one, in its own way, is part of the intelligence of the Cerrado, where living means resisting together-in composition with time, fire, climate, lands, places, and their guardians.

What is described there is not only the vegetal world. Each plant, each tree, is also a lesson in measure-neither too much nor too little. It is the pharmakon, as Isabelle Stengers recalls: that which heals and poisons at the same time, demanding attention and discernment about when and how to use it [4]. The knowledge that Enoc carries is the art of dosage-of reading the time of the plant, the body, the land, and the moon.

This art also extends to fire. Because here, burning is not destruction. Prescribed burning-the so-called *acero verde*-is an ancestral technology for managing the Cerrado, used for generations to protect and prepare the black soil, the soil of cultivation. As Enoc explains:

There’s the right month. You can’t use fire during flowering, or there will be no fruit. Not in the harsh dry season either. You have to know the day, the wind, the moon. The fiercest fire comes at the end of August. It only dies down in October.

Caring for the time of fire is also caring for life. Burn too early or too late, and everything is lost. But if it is done at the right moment-at the hour of fire, “from eleven to noon,” when the wind is calm-the Cerrado responds.

And when the burning escapes control, when measure is lost, fire ceases to be an ally. Then Troá appears-not as punishment, but as an enchanted being, a wind with its own force. As they say, “Troá is a creature of the wind. Wherever the fire was put out, it would sprout again.”

Troá cannot be extinguished. It dances with the wind, moving through caves and dense forests. It lives in holes in the earth, in cracks in rock, in the warm breath of the mountains-it is part of the very landscape of the Cerrado, which refuses to be dominated.

Troá teaches that fire has its owners, its days, its desires. That managing fire requires listening, not control or appropriation. As the elders say, fire is not an enemy but a force that must be respected-you must know the time of burning, the direction of the wind, the phase of the moon.

Just like the land, fire also has its own will. Antônio Bispo dos Santos reminds us: “the land gives, but the land also wants [5].” And with fire it is no different-it offers, but it also demands. Unlike the capitalist logic that turns everything into a resource to be exploited, fire, like the *encantados*, requires relationship. It asks for care, time, and listening.

What is at stake here is not domination over these forces, but a coexistence based on co-responsibility [6]. Troá, with its force, appears as an enchanted reminder of this demand: those who do not listen to the time of fire risk being swallowed by it. Because here, knowledge is not technical mastery, but lived relationship-among plants, animals, waters, winds, embers, and enchanted beings.

Like the pharmakon, fire holds both healing and danger within it. Everything depends on how it is invoked, how it is called, how it is respected.

“You shout a little. You stir it up like that. You call the Troá.” One must know how to call-and how to stop. Because Troá is a force of the world. It is the Cerrado responding.

To care, then, is this: learning to inhabit these presences. With winds that bring fire and healing. With trees that cry. With the times of the moon and of ash. Care is not intervention; it is listening, waiting, responding. It is walking attentively, knowing that the landscape speaks-and that every enchanted being has something to say.

The Cerrado is a world populated by presences, signs, and ways of existing. Among stories of Troá, Currupira, and Boitatá, what emerges is not a separate cosmology, but a living pedagogy of territory. The *encantados* are neither metaphors nor folklore; they are forces and forms of the landscape itself. They appear when they are spoken of, when the forest listens, when the wind carries a name, or when fire arrives before its proper time.

Troá is not the “villain” of fire, but its enchanted reverse-a sign that time has been broken, that listening has failed, that something has fallen out of rhythm. Troá cannot be explained or fixed, because its existence escapes the eye; it appears in traces, in sudden fright, in the smell of sulfur, in entrails left on the ground. And yet it is through Troá that one learns that fire has its days and its desires, as ancestral knowledge also teaches.

Thus, the point is not to study the *encantados*, but to understand that the Cerrado itself is enchanted-that it is made of attentive relations, of rules not written down but known by those who

have learned to listen to the forest, to the smell of wind, to the time of the moon. As the elders say, “nature is good; we are the ones who made it angry.” And when it becomes angry, it responds—with drought, fierce fires, pests. Yet most people still do not listen.

The science that emerges in these accounts is another kind of science. It is situated, practical, and affective. “Because it is dangerous,” as Dona Francisca aptly summarizes. It is not only about knowing how to walk—it is about knowing where to step, where to stop, what not to say. It is knowing that some plants deceive, some waters poison, some snakes hide where no one sees. Here, knowledge does not exist without body, without attention, without fear.

As Antônio Bispo dos Santos reminds us, the land—or fire—gives, but it also wants. And what it often wants is attention—not the kind that extracts, but the kind that listens, that understands that everything—from cutting a tree to the precise moment of burning—must be done with measure. Because when the Anandir is cut, it cries [5].

And Boitatá... Boitatá is not just a story. It is a blaze of fire that snakes across the mountaintops, a light that follows from afar, that frightens and fascinates. It leaves no trace, but it leaves presence. It walks through the nights along the hillsides, as if watching, as if responding.

Currupira, too, is not merely a being of the forest. He is a fold in time, a twist in logic. A human-shaped body with a mind askew. He walks with heels turned backward, tangles tracks, and challenges those who try to follow paths that are too straight. They say he enchants children, offering them honey—and through that gentle sweetness he changes thought, not through violence but through subtle twisting. Where he passes, the forest recomposes itself, yet it never becomes the same again: it tangles, reinvents itself, as if laughing at the human effort to control the uncontrollable.

As Marcela once said, “life is like that—everything changes.” And the Cerrado holds this restless time: a time that refuses alignment, that moves in spirals. A time that doubles itself, as Tania Stolze Lima might say, so that it is never identical—always other [6]. Each appearance of Currupira, each blaze of Boitatá or breath of Troá reopens the world in a gesture of difference—a fold of reality that forces us to perceive that living here means living among what escapes, what happens, and what transforms.

Ultimately, what is at stake is an ethics of care in the face of catastrophe. An ethics that does not separate knowledge from territory, nor science from enchantment. An ethics that says nature is not a backdrop, but a body. And that, in this moment when the world seems to be burning, perhaps the only science capable of sustaining life is the one that knows the time of burning, the silence of snakes, the crying of trees, and the cry of Troá.

Living Veredas: Paths of Multiple Coexistence

In Laranjal, the presence of animals began to change. Or rather, encounters with them began to happen differently. After the great fire, the *caititus*—which used to roam more frequently around the

fields, eating bananas, papayas, and cassava—moved away. They disappeared from everyday life. The *tuiuiu*, however, appeared more often, opening its wide wings over the burned fields, picking small fish from the few threads of water that remained. The puma did not enter the yard, but it was seen nearby, in the low forest, as if disoriented. The capybara and the tapir began drinking water in the tank right beside the house. The tapir was also seen in the fields, looking for papaya, looking for banana. The anteater came as well—*mirim*, small, with its long tail and strong smell. It appeared without ceremony among the houses. As if saying: the world over there caught fire, and now we must learn again how to live here.

“So many fires, I don’t know where they came from—everything came from there to here. Too fierce. And the wind that day!” Dona Joana told me, her face turned toward the sky. “It was July, the month of strong winds, girl, and it was hot.”

The fire came tearing everything apart, following the wind as if it were an animal too. In Mateus, it even caught the coconuts. In Magali, it reached the yard. It went no farther only because the people, buckets in hand, began holding the fire back, diverting it with courage and prayer.

But what is most striking is not only what burned. It is what moved with the fire. The flight of animals, the exchanged tracks, the gaze of people upon a land that no longer seems the same. In Laranjal, fire is a sign. It is movement. It is the forest’s response, as people have long said: “nature is good, very good—it’s us who made it angry today.” And it keeps responding, though not everyone knows how to listen.

Both Laranjal and Cambambi have their own particularities, but the way they look at, feel, and converse with the land resonates deeply. The seasons arrive through the body of the day: the steady heat announces—rain is coming. And even without a drop falling, the smell of warm earth, the lower flight of birds, the swelling sky all foretell it. Rain never arrives in only one way. It may not fall here, but it pours just ahead, toward Morro do Jacaré or farther out near Piuval. Because water, too, has ears, has will, has memory.

Seu Agostinho explains that there is something no one can fully explain: the mystery of the mountains. Some scientists say it is atmospheric pressure, layers of warm air, a cold front trapped on the plateau. But those who live here know there are things only the forest understands. Mystery is not discovered; mystery is crossed—with an attentive body, with an ear pressed to the ground, with a heart open like a field of soil after the first strike of the hoe.

And he continues: the mountains keep things. They keep animals, keep winds, keep time. There are nights when they seem to rise and draw closer to the houses, as if wanting to listen to people’s conversations. Other days they withdraw, hiding behind the mist. It may even seem that the world is about to end—with wars, ruptures, promises of catastrophe. But if the end of the world comes, it will not be the end of the Cerrado. The Cerrado has no end. There may be an end for humans, as we hear in conversations beside the water tank, but the world itself does not end. God... God does not end things. God keeps them. God is a kept secret, as the elders say.

I ask Seu Agostinho:

- But the end of the world comes for humans... and for whom else? Does it end for everyone?

He looks at me in that way of someone who thinks inwardly before releasing a word. A pause. Then he says: -You've reached a point. The world does end. Every day it ends. This isn't new.

We remain silent, as if the forest itself were listening.

-Nowadays people talk more about it, don't they? About the end of the world, about catastrophe. But it has been ending for a long time. It ends when a bird disappears. When a spring dries up. When a fire burns everything and leaves not even shade. Everyone feels it-even those who don't know they're feeling it.

He runs his finger across a dry leaf fallen nearby, as if reading a piece of history written on it.

-The Cerrado is very large-it's a vast world. When I say it doesn't end, I don't mean there is no death. There has always been death. For us, for the animals, even for the encantados. Some things leave and never return. The jaguar frightened away by the noise of machines. The anteater that no longer finds ants to eat. The water that turns into smoke and goes away. Some things disappear without leaving even a trace.

He takes a deep breath. The wind passes lower, as if wanting to listen more closely.

-But for plants... for plants it's different. They have a way of dying that is already a kind of rebirth. Some seeds sleep in the soil for years, waiting for the right moment to awaken. They return in silence, without fanfare, but they begin calling others-and more others-and when we notice, birds are returning, the scent of new flowers is in the air, bees are buzzing in the heat. Plants teach that endings are also beginnings. And that roots, even when burned, may still wish to live.

Final Considerations

This led me to ask: for whom do the Cerrados exist? And how do they exist?

Perhaps it is not simply a matter of having the Cerrado, but of living with it-as one walks beside a being that thinks, reacts, and transforms. In the quilombos, I learned that the Cerrado has mood, has time, has memory. It rejoices with the right rains, grows restless with unmeasured burning, grows sad when it is no longer walked with respect. It feels. And when it feels too much, it responds-sometimes with silence, sometimes with smoke, sometimes with gestures that speak and provoke.

Fire, in turn, is not merely an instrument or an enemy. It is kin. It is a teacher. And like every relative, it demands listening. Listening that happens through the body-through slow steps in the forest, attentive eyes to the direction of the wind, the restrained gesture of someone who knows the world is a shared presence.

Thus the question is not simply whether the Cerrado will resist or whether it will end. The question is: with whom is it willing to continue?

Because there are worlds that disappear not because they were destroyed all at once, but because they slowly fade when we stop listening to their rhythms, their rules, their signs.

In Cambambi, they told me that trees cry when they are cut without attention. In Laranjal, fire runs like an animal along the slopes. And within these words and presences lies something our science may have forgotten: to exist is to coexist. To live is a collective task.

The Cerrados exist for those who allow themselves to be transformed by them. For those who accept walking with snakes, learning from the wind, respecting the time of seeds and of the encantados. For those who know that not everything is meant to be dominated-some things are meant to be followed, like a trail that disappears and reappears further ahead.

The Cerrado, then, is not only a biome. It is a composition of encounters.

And if it is true that it is ending, it is also true that it still insists on living: in the strong smell of burned grass, in the returning anteater, in the wisdom of midwives, in the silence of long nights that announce rain. It insists on reminding us that there is still time-time to listen again, time to relearn how to live together, time not to be alone.

Because the Cerrado does not present itself in only one way-it is multiple, like fire itself. Each part of the body of fire-its head, its tongue, its fingers-ignites a different way of living the Cerrado. There is the cerradão, dense and closed; the vargem, open and low, which seems to breathe with the wind; the campo limpo, where the ground is almost sky. There are places where the forest seems to grow upside down, with roots more alive than the crowns. Others hold trees with thick bark and watery hearts.

Each type of Cerrado reveals a face of the world—and each face asks for a different way of being with it. Because the Cerrado teaches. But only to those willing to learn.

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