

Boundaries

It is some 300 meters to the western shore where the Chaco “begins” from where we stood on the Paraguay River’s eastern bank. I surveyed the river’s expanse as rafts of plants the size of small barges drifted by, carrying with them egrets whose white feathers popped from the background of greens and browns. Concepción has long been a primary port for travelers of all sorts to stock up and depart on trips to northern Paraguay. The small ramp where we put our fifteen-foot aluminum outboard boat in the water lies in the shadow of the decaying, abandoned Picis resort, just barely a kilometer from the city’s humble Anglican church, San Pablo. Celso, Juan, and I waited with the boat by the river’s edge as Diego and Santiago went to park their truck before we departed on the trip north to Kelyenmagategma.¹ Looking north to the main port a couple hundred meters upriver, I watched men scurrying over a wooden plank perilously balanced 5 meters over the water between the boat and the shore. It bounced as they carried bags and boxes of cargo onto the Aquidaban riverboat freighter, which is also the primary water taxi for all destinations north. The port of Concepción is where the first Anglican missionaries embarked on the 45-kilometer trip upstream to Carayá Vuelta, where they first established a presence in the Chaco. Our trip would trace their route, though with different outcomes in mind.

Kelyenmagategma is a place of many names and many stories. Located where the Paraguay River makes a seemingly impossible turn that wraps more than ninety degrees around a resistant peninsula of low-lying earth, river travelers have long called the site Carayá Vuelta, howler monkey bend. When Anglicans arrived in the waning years of the nineteenth century, Carayá Vuelta was home to the small riverside ranching outpost of Puerto Colón. The fact that British Anglicans helped spur settler colonization of Paraguay’s Bajo Chaco from a place that bears the Spanish surname of the most infamous colonizer in the Americas, Christopher Columbus, illuminates contrapuntal temporalities of colonialism that continue to shape the present. While our boat plied the sediment-laden waters and struggled

against the current, Celso told me, “In our language, Kelyenmagategma means ‘the place where the roofs shine.’” As with many Enxet community names, this is not a metaphor but a literal geo-graphing whereby place-names are born from descriptions of relations: Yakye Axa is the site of a palm island; Sawhoyamaxa is a particular grove of palms; and Xákmok Kásek is the place of many small parrots. Unlike toponyms that reference human-environment relations, Kelyenmagategma bears the traces of racial geographies forged through colonization. The name of the community derives from the site where the original Puerto Colón staff used tin roofs to adorn their buildings, roofs that shine in the sun. Celso described how he had learned that his people came to know the location by that name and had not used another for generations.

The histories that Enxet and Sanapaná peoples recount are not buried under the geological strata of time passed or erased by the limited spaces afforded Indigenous peoples through the politics of recognition. Instead, such histories are exposed in place-names like Kelyenmagategma, as if the seasonal floods that drive the constant rise and fall of the Paraguay River and inundate the Bajo Chaco carry away the possibility of burying the past. As I would learn on our trip to “walk the line” in the place where the roofs shine, the past is present in the lives of those who maintain their connections with the land and in the stories that they tell.² Indeed, historical violence that gives places new meaning shapes but does not determine the present struggles of Indigenous peoples who have recovered lands, yet confront the complex terrain of dispossession woven into the fabric of settler colonialism.

The trip to Kelyenmagategma was four years in the making. Unlike the other Enxet and Sanapaná communities where I conducted research for this book, Kelyenmagategma’s case did not advance to the IACHR but reached a friendly settlement in 2011 mediated by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights. Akin to Yakye Axa, Sawhoyamaxa, and Xákmok Kásek, the Kelyenmagategma community endured land dispossession by ranchers and was employed to work the ranches that enclosed their lands. They were also denied due process by the Paraguayan state to effectively resolve a long-standing demand for land restitution in accordance with state law. The Inter-American Commission determined such issues amounted to human rights violations but mediated a settlement whereby the owners of El Algarrobal company who had purchased Puerto Colón sold 8,748 hectares to INDI to satisfy the community’s demand for restitution of its ancestral territories. Yet state officials had not conducted an in situ survey to establish the physical location of the property lines. The interceding years brought tense relations between two neighbors who disputed where Colón ends and Kelyenmagategma begins. Our trip was intended to remedy the situation by verifying the new property line.

After two hours on the water, Santiago steered our boat left, toward the western bank of the river. Excised into the land, the river often flows more than a meter below its surface. As we approached the shore, a handful of small, gray, palm-wood homes with tin roofs came into sight, along with a herd of some twenty burros that grazed a grass expanse between the houses and an old retiro adorned

with a large wraparound porch and a tarnished, rust-spotted tin roof. Constructed under the terms of the Inter-American Commission settlement, a large health post encircled by a short cyclone fence stood near the retiro with a sign at the peak of the roof that announced we had arrived at Carayá Vuelta, but it notably failed to name Kelyenmagategma. The boat slid onto the short, muddy bank, and we offloaded our things, then walked to the large retiro where Celso and his family now live. Sitting on the veranda of the old building, we planned the trip to the southern property line on the following day, as Celso's young son served us *tereré*.³

Early the next morning, we awoke to the sound of burros stomping the ground as they protested the saddles being put on them. As the floodwaters had not fully receded this year, Celso assured us the burros would make the trip easier. After a breakfast of *cocido*, *coquitos*, and tortillas, we divvied up the burros, loaded our gear, and set forth. Though just about 7 kilometers, the trip took hours. Straining under our weight as they navigated knee-high water and deep mud, the burros labored along a tight trail woven through the forest thicket. Eventually, the forest opened from the thorny undergrowth to a sparse palm forest and grass landscape that has come to define much of the Bajo Chaco ranching region. We made our way to a small clearing near a creek where we set up our camp. Though it was still before noon, Diego wanted to rest and eat lunch before beginning work. The seven members of Kelyenmagategma who guided Diego and Juan to the disputed boundary line were disappointed. After waiting so long for a surveyor to arrive, the last thing anyone wanted was to wait longer. Nevertheless, we all sat and ate.

It was already afternoon when Diego pulled out his reference map and GPS to begin verifying the location of the southern property line. Diego and Juan consulted with Mario to ascertain his understanding of the property limits, then used the GPS to verify the state-recognized limits, which they then marked by cutting blazes into trees. The rest of the crew and I followed with machetes, axes, a chainsaw, and shovels to clear brush and then cut and place fence posts. Despite the hard work, stifling heat, and pouring sweat, people laughed as each new post was placed and the line we geo-graphed inscribed a new story onto the land. After three hours, we had marked about 250 meters of the property line. But the work slowed when we noticed Diego, Juan, and Mario talking in a group with looks of frustration on their faces. One by one, crew members stopped working and walked over to see what the problem was. Our trajectory intersected a small but significant creek that meanders along the length of the southern property line and was swollen by seasonal rains. "We're done. The water in the creek is deep, and there is no way to cross without getting wet," Diego proclaimed. With a silent look of exhaustion and exasperation, Mario surveyed the waters and one of our crew members started to walk down the steep bank to investigate. But to no avail. Juan protested, "I only have one pair of shoes. If we go in, they will be wet for the rest of the days we are here. I think we should wait until it is dry to finish." Clearly displeased but not willing to push a confrontation with the INDI officials too far, a few men walked back to continue working on the last post they had set, muttering



FIGURE 4. Diego (right) and part of the Kelyenmagategma work crew talking after work was halted for the day. Note that the man second from the left is leaning against one of the newly crafted property line markers.

under their breath as they went. But Diego had made up his mind. We went back and sat around camp for the rest of the day.

As night fell, we lit several small fires to keep the clouds of mosquitoes and horseflies away from the burros. Although alcohol is prohibited in Kelyenmagategma, Diego and Juan had a small bottle of caña that they nursed by their own fire, talking loudly through the dark night. Mario and I stood by another fire. He was curious to know about Indigenous rights in the United States and how I had come to learn Guaraní. We talked for a long time, as he stared into the fire, his eyes surveying the flames. At one point, Mario changed topics and began to share stories of life at Puerto Colón, when the community was enclosed on the ranch property. The land known as Puerto Colón had changed hands several times since the Anglican arrival. In 2002, El Algarrobal took control. “The Enxet have almost always lived on the ranch and worked for the patrones. We lived on the ranch for a very long time until it got too bad with Algarrobal,” Mario explained. He described the systematic ways that El Algarrobal administrators, staff, and police terrorized the community over several years. They burned the school to the ground. They regularly stole the community’s burros. They armed themselves and stalked community members when they went to hunt or fish. They falsely accused community members of stealing cattle and had them arrested. Kelyenmagategma leaders denounced these violent acts by filing formal legal complaints with the aid of Tierraviva. At every turn, state officials neglected to adjudicate the claims or hold El Algarrobo staff accountable.

The violence took a new form when ranch administrators attacked the community under the supervision of Paraguayan police in 2003 and 2004, in an attempt to force the Kelyenmagategma community to abandon its claim for land restitution, initially filed in 2000. The Inter-American Commission describes the following key events.

There were two critical moments in the pattern of violence against members of the Community in less than one year. The first took place on August 30, 2003, the date the indigenous people were expelled from their settlement by police, armed civilians, and two prosecutors, without a judicial order for eviction or search. The second was recorded on August 29, 2004, when employees of the El Algarrobal S.A. company assaulted Community members. They threw petards at dwellings and fired gunshots to again evict them violently from their settlement, forcing them to disperse and take refuge in the mountains.⁴

Still looking at the fire, Mario described these events in great detail. No one was given much time to evacuate their homes, and they were not allowed to return to gather their belongings before the ranch staff set fire to their houses. The ranchers shot into the air and at the houses to scare people. Community members scattered, hiding in the forest for fear that the ranchers would turn the guns on them. The event happened one year after police, accompanied by the ranchers, illegally evicted the community from their homes on the ranch. During that event, people fled eight kilometers to a site near the retiro where Celso now lives, where they hid on the banks of the Paraguay River for several days. An elderly woman died, and many children fell ill. Mario lamented, "They destroyed everything we had. We are poor people. There is no work out here. It takes a long time to get the money to buy things. It was a long time ago, but most of us have not been able to replace the things that we lost." Even though Kelyenmagategma now has land rights, it remains a neighbor of Puerto Colón. Mario said, "Many of us are still afraid to go out in the forest alone. The people from Colón have no shame. They could do anything. We want this property line, so they know where our land begins." We did not map the boundary the following day. Instead, on Diego's instructions, we split into two teams to investigate other parts of the property line, but we were foiled again by the floodwaters.

The boundaries between Kelyenmagategma and Puerto Colón surpass any cartographic or juridical imaginary of property in land. They are boundaries inherent to the fraught politics of recognition, defined not by fences but by juridical delays that harken to the legal liminality and geographies of power that result from patrón-Indigenous relations. Such boundaries reveal how patronage operates through the subtle but powerful outcomes of bureaucratic procedures, whereas state officials and institutions hold power over other citizens by either withholding or granting access to vital services or resources. Diego, Juan, Santiago, and I left early the next day. Kelyenmagategma would have to wait for the waters to recede before we could attempt to resolve any further questions about the boundaries that lie between their lands and those of Puerto Colón.