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Speculative Accumulation: Property-Making in the Brazilian Amazon

By

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R E S U M O

Este artigo explora como os assentados não-indígenas na Amazônia brasileira adotam estratégias territoriais com o intento de tornar legíveis e legítimas suas propriedades de acordo aos parâmetros das novas reformas governamentais. Na Amazônia, representações oficiais para o desenvolvimento da região são inúmeras ao longo das últimas cinco décadas, estabelecendo uma série de procedimentos contraditórios para reivindicar, manter e dispor da propriedade. Etnografia revela que os colonos tratam como recursos estratégicos a história ambígua da posse e também a sua familiaridade com a terra. Querendo parecer acatar uma possível reforma da situação fundiária, os colonos se envolvem em uma forma de acumulação especulativa: não se trata de uma acumulação de territórios como tal, porem dos meios para defender ou ampliar uma futura reivindicação de terras. Permanecer viá velem um sistema emergente de governança faz com que os colonos busquem uma variedade de práticas discursivas e materiais surpreendentes. [Amazônia, a situação fundiária, colonização, governança ambiental, historicidade]

A B S T R A C T

This article explores how nonindigenous settlers in the Brazilian Amazon pursue vernacular territorial strategies as they attempt to make property legible and legitimate in an emerging order of state-led governance reforms. In Amazonia, official figurations for the development of the region have layered upon one another over the past 50 years, depositing a range of contradictory procedures for claiming, holding, and disposing of property. Ethnography shows how residents draw on the ambiguous history of property-making and their deep familiarity with surrounding landscapes to influence new environmental governance paradigms. With the goal of appearing in line with state-led tenure reform, colonists engage in a form of speculative accumulation: not an accumulation of territories as such, but of means to defend or extend one's

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future land claims. Remaining viable in a possible future governance scheme requires colonists to pursue a range of surprising material and discursive practices. [Amazonia, colonization, environmental governance, historicity, land tenure]

THIS ARTICLE IS A MEDITATION ON THE MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL frameworks of colonization on a resource frontier. Roads, bridges, and dams are among the material technologies reshaping forests, wetlands, and backlands throughout Latin America in the early–21st century, in a reprise and extension of mid–20th-century development dreams. These technologies, and the flows of people and goods that they enable, are accompanied by less material but equally crucial colonial technologies, including regimes of citizenship, legal procedures, and ideas and practices concerning land tenure. Bringing a region into the thrall of market and state regimes of circulation and control is an uneven, halting, and surprising process: here, I explore the crucial role played by low-level settlers and speculators in bringing to life larger visions of accumulation and civilization.¹

Migrants and colonists living along an unpaved road in the Brazilian Amazon have become accustomed to politicians' promises to properly develop and integrate the region into the national economy—pledges launched predictably during elections since the mid-1990s. This highway—the Br-163 through Western Pará—was carved out of lowland canopy and scrub forest in the early 1970s, initially attracting a modest stream of landless migrants from Brazil's northeast (*nordestinos*), soon followed by a smattering of ranchers and loggers from the country's south (*gaúchos*).² The road remains unpaved—and thus impassable for six to nine months of the year—along a thousand kilometer stretch. As infrastructure, the road fails to hold together the material or ideological projects it was meant to embody: it is neither a reliable conduit for agricultural goods, nor has it served as a backbone for state-building projects from agrarian reform to environmental surveillance. Instead, over the past 40 years, the Br-163 highway has remained largely as it has always been—muddy in the winter, dusty in the summer, bisected by rivers over which no bridges stay spanned for much longer than a season. This region is not part of the famous “Arc of Deforestation” associated with highway construction, spontaneous colonization, and the expansion of monocrop soy agriculture over the past 30 years. Here, there is no superhighway, and little “time-space compression” results, as it takes up to two weeks to traverse the road south from Santarém to the Mato Grosso border.

What brought me to this part of the world was an interest in how the region's colonists—around 40,000 people in an area slightly larger than that of Italy—relate to the road and to their region more broadly. Since 2000, the federal government

in Brazil has circulated plans for the paving and completion of the highway as one part of a larger effort to introduce “environmental governance” into the region. Far from the muddy highway, plans to pave the road were hotly debated: in 2001, the United States–based foods trader, Cargill, opened a massive soy terminal at the northern terminus of the planned highway, sparking an international chorus of skepticism as to whether Brazil could balance the interests of agro-industrial capital and its own ambitious goals to reduce deforestation.³ It seemed reasonable that the return-to-roads would capture local interest and inspire all sorts of discussion about the future development of the region. To my surprise, people did not much care about the road as such: support for it was unanimous, and did not seem to pit different interests against one another. Although some of the older residents skeptically recalled how a half-dozen similar plans and promises had worked their way down the road over the past four decades, nearly everyone I spoke with believed that the paving of the Br-163 was imminent and that the road represented “progress” for the region.

Throughout the 2000s, residents of Castelo de Sonhos—the small roadside hamlet where I based my research—waited for the road to come. They are still waiting.⁴ And even though this fated infrastructure has not yet unleashed its predicted effects—from economic development to deforestation and class warfare—Castelenses and other rural residents in Amazonia have spent a considerable amount of time adjusting their daily practices in response to a far more pervasive and controversial element of local infrastructure. No one really wanted to debate issues to do with the road; when questioned, people revealed only easy answers about it being “a matter of time” before the region carved by the highway would “join the rest of Brazil” via a reliable highway. What was far more contentious—and much more fundamental to understanding the sociopolitics of life in an overdetermined frontier zone—were settlers’ debates about and practices concerning property.

Land tenure was the colonial infrastructure that settlers were most concerned with creating, even in advance of the high-profile highway. The infrastructural parable here, therefore, is that of property: how it frames, both conceptually and materially, a world of relations among people, their environments, and their history. I agree with recent work⁵ that has urged an anthropological reappraisal of property. My intention in this article is to outline how, as an emic category among rural Amazonians awaiting development and governance, property became the idiom and the practice through which migrants have flexibly adapted to a shifting terrain of governance possibilities. In the 1970s, conventional wisdom in Brazil saw the Amazon as a wild, empty frontier that demanded intense government presence lest Brazil lose the region; in the 1980s it was shaped by resource extraction and large-scale agriculture; and currently, national and international concerns about biodiversity and climate change predominate. In each of these eras, the

Brazilian federal government devised different protocols for establishing legal and legitimate property claims, and settlers have carried these diverging property-making practices with them into this region. The result has been a clamor of confusion and invention in rural Amazonia, where property regimes are contested and individual property claims more often than not are provisional. In Pará state alone—where I have been conducting research since 2004—prospectors have registered an acreage in excess of four times the total land area of the state in title agencies—stark evidence of the unsettled, murky, and excessive nature of property claims in the region.⁶

Property plays a foundational role in the disposition of people and territories, but the question of who—or what—makes property remains to be explored. Roads and bridges have builders, from planners to craftspeople; they also have users. They hold certain economic relations together, and privilege certain points of view or cultural styles. But who makes property, and what holds property together? Is it title deeds, boundary trails, and fences; is it the expectation of inheritance or compound interest and rent; or is it the sheer discursive and material force of property ideology, be it liberal or socialist? These questions are too large to be taken up here, but they chart a fresh approach to property, which is one of the oldest objects of anthropological inquiry.⁷ In rural Amazonia, it has been settlers and colonists (and increasingly native peoples) who have literally made property, both at the level of individual claims and at the level of coherent systems of publicly recognized entitlement. This claim—that local people have created property, largely in the absence of the state, but always with an eye toward state recognition—is what remains to be explored here. The arguments developed below allow us to better understand the relationship between local vernacular practices and emerging forms of capitalism and governance on a resource frontier. I offer the concept of “speculative accumulation” to describe the imaginative and material processes through which colonists and settlers create property relations before their formal ratification by the Brazilian state or market. As occupants of a space and time that they understand to be before the inevitable arrival of development, law, and history, settlers are inventing vernacular property-making strategies as a means to anticipate (and even influence) future state regulations. In the erratic and often murky context of the frontier’s expansiveness, strategies of accumulation are unpredictable, and the means of accounting for property and resourcefulness are inchoate. Speculative accumulation marks the attempts by recent frontier settlers to predict and perform the future shapes of social and economic infrastructures in Amazonia; beyond mere resource capture, the vernacular property-making strategies that settlers pursue can be viewed as vital, if poorly understood, components of emerging processes of accumulation and dispossession on resource frontiers.

This research intervenes in larger debates on the relationship between culture and regimes of environmental governance that are appearing throughout the

developing world. Following anthropologists Tania Li (2007) and Paige West (2006), I endeavor to show here how local peoples negotiate a range of subject positions as they come into contact with the state as “stakeholders” in development futures. These actors move adroitly through what Anna Tsing has called a “zone of not yet” (2005: 29); they are self-conscious participants in the dreams and dramas of the frontier as they eagerly await clear signals from the state. As such, this work builds on Arun Agrawal’s (2005) insight that the project of environmental governance does not proceed evenly from state visions to local practice. Indeed, it is perhaps more valuable to consider how local communities create the idioms and practices through which governance becomes possible by anticipating and co-opting the strategies that government and NGO allies use to manage the region. Colonists in rural Amazonia are engaging in their own vernacular forms of “seeing like a state” (Scott 1998), which are themselves influencing the shape of the state to come. As I suggest below, focusing on improvised property-making strategies in Amazonia offers insights into policies currently being drawn up to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases in the region. Brazil is the world’s fourth largest contributor to climate change, and much of its emissions are due to deforestation land conversion in Amazonia. Ambitious global carbon trading schemes that overlook the centrality—and the chimeric qualities—of property-making for rural communities risk repeating the lamentable history of development interventions along the Amazonian frontier.

Development, Infrastructure, Property

That frontier—the great green Amazon—has been variously imagined throughout history. Since 1970, development paradigms have piled upon one another along the unpaved Br-163, and each continues to claim a shifting set of adherents: first was the stalled effort at agrarian reform aimed at resettling landless *nordestinos* in Amazonia, then came incentives for commercial agriculturalists decamping from Brazil’s south, and the latest vision outlines conservation protocols and sustainability initiatives. Careful observers and critics of Brazil’s use of roads to give “land without people to people without land” have effectively argued that the military dictatorship’s agrarian reform in the 1970s can best be understood as a policy that encouraged poor northeasterners to occupy Amazonia, fail as farmers, then devolve their territories to more highly capitalized ranchers, farmers, and industry (see Foweraker 1981; Little 2001). In this cycle, a cynical populism cuts roads and sends *nordestinos* out along them to ready the way for the next wave of state-backed clients, who in turn claim land and pursue modes of extraction and accumulation under different terms and policies (see Bunker 1985; Hecht 1993). According to the insightful analysis of Marianne Schmink and Charles

Wood (1992), the Brazilian Amazon is wracked by a series of “contested frontiers,” competing visions and technologies for incorporating the region into the national economy. Where highly capitalized or government-backed actors have prevailed in these “contests”—for example, in the mines and ranchlands of southeastern Pará, or in the soy and beef corridors of Rondônia and Mato Grosso—social inequality and environmental devastation have been the result.

The history of the Transamazonian Highway, which was built in the 1970s and was the site of much government effort in terms of colonization and investment, reveals a cycle of social crisis, environmental destruction, and wealth concentration that has been well examined in the literature on roads. Along colonization corridors, initial contact with native peoples was followed by gold rushes, land rushes, violence, deforestation, ranching, and today’s advancing soy plantations (Mendoza et al. 2007; Schmink and Wood 1992). By contrast, the unpaved Br-163 was never a priority for investment or large-scale colonization in the late-20th century; along its length the road remains a quieter place—an odd sort of frontier-in-waiting. Here, recently arrived migrants make their personal histories relevant in the present, which begs the question of how roadside residents are negotiating the varied, contradictory, yet ever-present models for the future of the region. The answer is that residents are using the development archive to prepare for possibilities. The pile of past development plans offers justification for all sorts of frontier activities in the present, and revitalized development models provide a rhetorical and material link to governance in a region where the state is present largely through its absence.

Property-making is the principal technology that rural migrants use to signal their intentions to stay in the region, and the development archive offers a range of different practices and legal justifications for making property legible. Since 1970, when Brazil’s military dictatorship sought to fill the “terra nullius” of the Amazon region by transplanting poor tenant farmers from the northeast, nearly 70 percent of land in Amazonia has been declared public property, or *Terra da União*. This includes a 200-km wide band along the new highways that the dictatorship plowed into the region throughout the 1970s. Land reform legislation at the time entitled any migrant to a plot of federal land that he could claim via usufruct homesteading rights: all he had to do was cut boundary trails (or *picadas*) and deforest at least half of his 100 hectare plot as evidence of a desire to “improve” the land through farming.⁸ After a year and a day, the Land Reform Agency would grant fee simple title to the homesteader: this piece of paper would entitle the holder to credit, the legal right to sell his property, or to leave the deeds to his heirs. Thousands of nordestinos homesteaded in this manner along the Transamazonian Highway,⁹ but they were eventually violently ousted by expropriating miners and ranchers.⁹ Along the quieter Br-163, hundreds of nordestinos cut *picadas* in hopes of claiming clear title, but due to sheer distance and lack of reliable transportation, few ever

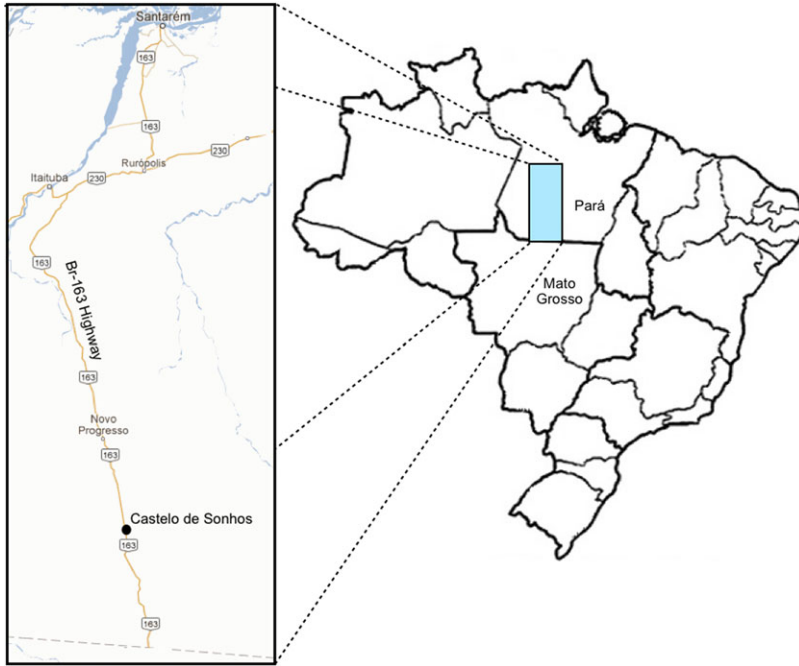


Figure 1 *Brazil and study area.*

received official papers from the state. Those who did often find the coordinates of their properties on paper to be in error, or find themselves being shaken down for a bribe from a low-level official. Longtime residents of Castelo de Sonhos tell me that by 1985 most early homesteaders had given up their failing farms. Many sought work on ranches or in wildcat logging operations in the Tapajós Valley, although a few continued farming on their first or subsequent homestead claims (see Figure 1).

Nordestinos continue to cut picada trails in and around Castelo, in a method of claiming property that they have also shared with more recent migrants from the south. These so-called gaúchos began moving into southern Pará in the mid-1980s, as the advance front of a larger demographic shift from southern Brazil into Mato Grosso that has become the agricultural heartland of Brazil over the past three decades. Enticed by government subsidies for cheap land, these whiter, wealthier migrants from the south deforested nearly all of Mato Grosso (“thick forest” in Portuguese) in the 1990s. Corporate colonization drove the property game for the gaúchos: lands were subdivided by a private real estate venture based in São Paulo or Porto Alegre, which sold deeds to aspiring migrants. Most of these deeds corresponded to actual plots of earth, although many did not. Further, many

of the initial buyers of land were wealthy urbanites seeking only a hedge against Brazil's rampant inflation in the 1980s and 1990s (Alston et al. 1999). Most of these absentee owners subdivided lands and sold them on to third parties without much care as to whether or not deeds corresponded to physical properties. The result was tenure confusion in northern Mato Grosso—a confusion in which much depended on the possession of title papers, which in turn assumed a quasi-magical status. If an unlucky migrant found her lot already occupied, or simply did not like the lay of the land, she could simply move further along and edit the terms written out on the deed papers. Forgery became a means to salvage or even expand on an investment: and thus the method of *grilagem*, or land speculation through forgery, was imported into Amazonia.

“Grilagem” derives from the Portuguese word for cricket: grilo. This is due to the fact that practitioners of grilagem devised an ingenious way to make their forged land titles look and feel authentically aged by using crickets.¹⁰ After composing deeds with the desired coordinates—often on paper mocked up to look like official government stock—a claimant places the deed in a shoe box with as many as two dozen crickets, buries the box, and after a few weeks digs it up. In the meantime, the crickets have defecated on the once-new deed and have chewed away at its edges, producing a crinkly sheet that is passably old and official. To support this prevalent practice, a few migrants became experts in cricket husbandry, and charged a sizable fee for the service of browning papers that nowadays come straight from inkjet printers before they head into the dark with the crickets.

In and around Castelo de Sonhos, a widely distributed population of 4,000 migrants—evenly split between Nordestinos and gaúchos—cuts picada trails and forges papers to make claims on property. One significant attribute of all this labor-making property is that it is not done for the state to see, or at least not directly. The nearest land reform or environmental protection offices are located over 1,000 km away. Rather, picadas and crickets form part of a system of signaling and bluffing through which migrants aim to remain relevant in the region should governance ever arrive. This cat and mouse game encourages the relatively poorer nordestino and the wealthier gaúcho to trade methods and perspectives: a gaúcho might forge a paper that entitles him to 2,000 hectares, while a nordestino cuts picadas marking a homestead inside that gaúcho's claim. In an ironic reversal of roles, I have documented southerners cutting picadas while citing their rights to do so under the agrarian reform legislation of the 1970s (long before gaúchos began migrating north). Conversely, I have seen many northeasterners forging title papers with the justification that “everyone around here needs to defend their claims, and papers are powerful things.”

This business is not only about making property appear, but also involves making it disappear: it was not uncommon for me to be walking along a boundary pathway with a homesteader only to step out into a blasted landscape, where a



Figure 2 *Walking the picada trail, Castelo de Sonhos, July 2011 (photo by author).*

rival or a trouble-maker had burned out the path cut by a picada, thereby erasing the trail that bounded a property claim (see Figure 2). Similarly, industrious speculators attempt to short-circuit other claimants' boundary paths by spreading fast-growing seedlings in pathways. Carpentaria palms and lead-wood saplings¹¹ can achieve a height of four feet within three months of germination. During the rainy season, they provide ledges for creepers and vines that can quickly engulf a narrow forest opening.

I found that cutting and managing picadas—along with the more subversive task of forging title deeds—are prevalent practices in Castelo de Sonhos. The principal economic activities include petty ranching and subsistence farming; a few

illegal sawmills operate as well. Grocery stores stock up with nonperishable goods during the dry months when transport is good, but generally locals try to grow their own foods (manioc, beans, corn, livestock). In terms of social mobility, southerners are generally more prosperous than northeasterners, but neither ranching nor smallholding generates very much product that can be sold for profit in larger regional markets. Since the state agency for colonization and agrarian reform (Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform [INCRA]) has no nearby offices, all real estate transactions are technically illegal, and proceed in an informal manner. Using picadas and forged papers allows a colonist to avoid the local real estate “market” altogether, and sets him up to either sell portions of the land later, make claims in court at a future date, or generally slow down the process of land allocation in the event of future state efforts at reform. In light of these “free” means of turning land into property, in three years of field research, I found the price per hectare of land in the region actually fell.¹² In fact, few land transactions took place, despite the growing expectation that the Br-163 highway would be paved through Castelo at the time. By contrast, nearly all the Castelenses I met who concerned themselves with “inland” lands, toward the east and west of the bisecting highway, trafficked in fake papers and picada-cutting tactics. They seemed to have little interest in selling their land, or in opening up their land to ranches, logging, or the like. Crickets, trails, and fires were strategic resources in another kind of real estate game in which colonists were content to hold onto lands and project such holdings into the future.

Thus, we can see how property-making in Castelo de Sonhos is an uneven, fully emplaced, and thoroughly embodied process for migrants. Making property requires specialized knowledge of the landscape, of the properties of crickets and plants, of the habits and motivations of neighbors. It requires patience and invention, and the ability to be flexible. The question remains, however: why are these northeasterners and southerners so concerned with making property, especially since such claims are provisional at best? To answer this question, we need to delve deeper into the nature of property as a cultural project, and the relationship it has to the state, the market, and to locals’ understandings of the shape of history.

Making, Shifting Claims

As we have seen, the unpaved Br-163 defines a region in which no single project of territory has achieved hegemony, but where colonists are in the midst of experimenting. Roadside residents are held in thrall by the unsettled character of the region, and by the possibilities they envision and create. These propositions lead

me to offer two related arguments to theorize how roadside residents are actively participating in the elaboration of future governance plans in rural Amazonia.

First, along the Br-163, property speculation is not about accumulation as such, but is rather for colonists a means to anticipate future governance. In rural Amazonia, there are multiple means to establish property and no final adjudication to distinguish a legitimate from a fraudulent claim.¹³ When a squatter cites usufruct rights and a rancher points to the representative fetish of the title deed, both claimants feel they have the backing of legal principles—and both are correct. However, rarely is either the aspiring smallholder or the titled farmer able to call upon the state to enforce one or another claim. In this context, it would be understandable if colonists did not bother at all with property, and rather concerned themselves with less ambiguous prospects, such as mining or logging. But conjuring property is the foremost activity of roadside residents, from poor colonists to large-scale ranchers. These roadside residents are making property in order to lodge themselves into the region's future, and are oriented toward what might happen next. Anticipating likely state actions, they position their claims to maximal perceived benefit.

This configuration is at odds with our standard models of colonial expansion along resource frontiers: work in Amazonia and throughout the world has consistently shown that capitalist relations proceed through a more-or-less orderly distribution of claims on property (see Alston et al. 1999). Marx's analysis of primitive accumulation is apposite here, wherein he showed how the privatization of the commons affected both the initial historical impetus for the accumulation of surplus and the creation of a landless working class from whom the new owners could extract and accumulate additional surplus. The Turnerian frontier of North America is similar: pursuant to the federal government's expropriation of lands from Native Americans, US citizens could take private possession of land and begin the process of extraction and accumulation. But along the Br-163 highway, property claims do not sit still: they are a volatile and dynamic element of the landscape. Colonists from Brazil's northeast and south seem to be less concerned with securing and accumulating lands along the highway in the present and more focused on flexibly experimenting with the practices of making property claims appear legitimate to a future governance regime that might someday arrive.

Here, would-be ranchers are not felling large tracts of forest for their cattle herds; indeed, most "ranchland" is still forested, while the only things holding together the ranchers' claims are pieces of paper and picada trails. In this situation, where property claims exist only in the subjunctive, "owners" are less likely to insist on their inviolate rights to command the properties they aspire to. One gaúcho who had large claims on paper explained his method for dealing with a competing claim to his property:

If a fella is clearing trails on my land, I've got several options, but none of them involve getting the government to kick him off my land. Maybe I'll let him keep the area. Maybe I'll talk to him and see if he'll pay rent. Maybe I'll just expand my claim on the other side and cut trails deeper into the forest. There's so much land here, and at this point we're all just trying to carve out a piece and hold onto it.¹⁴

This sentiment is surprising for at least two reasons. First, here is a rancher telling us that he can live with squatters on his land; this would be unthinkable throughout the rest of Brazil.¹⁵ However, this is not a matter of generosity. Rather, this rancher is expressing the flexible logics of property-making. Rather than accumulating land, his priority is to maintain his future ability to claim legitimacy when the state and governance arrives. Second, this short extract betrays a reformed colonial vision—one where the forest is seen as a resource to be left standing, since a standing forest offers more flexibility when it comes to repositioning property claims. The environment is valuable not because of the board feet of lumber that can be extracted from it, but because it is the terrain in which property claims are made and managed.

For the roughly four thousand colonists who have decided to stay in the region of Castelo de Sonhos, the establishment of property that might someday be judged as legitimate is the *sine qua non* of the colonial reformulation of the Amazon. That is, roadside residents understand themselves as living in a time before history's arrival, which is defined by the struggle to establish oneself in space and time before the arrival of the state and the market. This is clearly a capitalist fantasy, but it is a fantasy that structures colonist behaviors. They understand that many of their present activities are destined to be erased when the singular political economic system arrives and the history of the present is written. Until that time, residents experiment with multiple activities and property-making strategies to hedge their bets: after all, they are before history, and cannot be quite sure which configuration of property, law, or governance will prevail. Sooner or later, ambiguities over property claims will be sorted out, and some roadside residents will prove to be on the right side of history. Meanwhile, they wait in anticipation, and seek to create the conditions for the state's arrival by building concepts and practices that political economy might recognize and reward. Smallholder and large-scale proprietor alike are engaged in the dirty work of making, forging, and relocating property, rather than accumulating vast tracks of land, these *nordestinos* and *gaúchos* are more focused on staying relevant in the property game. As we have seen, these seeming adversaries actually learn property-making methods from one another, and swap stories about future governance possibilities.

So, even as migrants remake local landscapes according to their own anticipations about what might be deemed legitimate in the future, both plans and migrants alike are transformed by the exigencies of living in the region. My second

argument emerges at this crucial point: keeping up in the property game induces colonists into a process of localization—they come into intimate and surprising relations with other migrants and the environments that surround them. We have already seen the creative uses to which colonists put crickets, trails, and plants as they learn to stay relevant in the property game. Settlers also need to negotiate the road—and the trails, streams, and paths that it crosses—and soon they become intimately familiar with Amazonian landscapes and even begin to identify as Amazonian. Far from supermarkets, settlers begin to plant the regional staple manioc in small house gardens. During the long rainy season when the road is inaccessible to traffic, fish caught in local streams and rivers provide the largest share of settlers' protein. This process of localization changes colonialist projects in important ways and draws our attention to both the nonhuman agencies and emergent subject positions that comprise rural Amazonian livelihoods.

The point here is that neither land reform colonists nor southern agriculturalists have their colonial expectations met when they arrive in the region, and soon each begins to construct expansive but idiosyncratic networks in order to survive. To paraphrase the environmental anthropologist Tim Ingold, along the unpaved Br-163, life “goes on along” the trail, both in the literal sense that residents spend considerable amounts of time and energy moving, and in the figurative sense implied in Ingold's use of the term “wayfaring” to describe a practice of movement that is predicated on the traveler interacting with and reading the signs that the environment around him features (2000). Rural Amazonians must find their way in the ersatz economy and society of the region, and to do so they become perceptive collectors of locally relevant knowledge. Walking, looking, listening, spreading rumors, hiding their tracks: these are some of the practices residents use to make their way along the road. Knowing how to recognize a freshly opened picada trail, how to fish or hunt game or collect crickets, how to maneuver around a competitor: these are the kinds of intimate environmental knowledges that colonists acquire as they stake and reposition property claims in the region. These localized practices give shape to settlers' speculations about what is to come and constitute broadly shared norms about how to think about and interact with government reforms. Dedicated to sticking around to see some portion of their claims ratified by the state, residents become well-informed inhabitants of a diverse and dynamic environment, almost in spite of their colonial inclinations to turn empty forest into “productive” landscapes.

Long-term Br-163 residents have augmented the already existing meshwork of indigenous trails, lines of flight, and itinerant economic practices that have long typified the region. They came to colonize—and their actions and perspectives remain oriented around creating a new and “civilized” world in the forest—but these roadside residents are not your typical colonialists. The road, the rain, the presence of contradictory colonial visions, and the materialities of property-making are

elements in an unpredictable landscape, in which migrants find themselves disenfranchised as colonial masters and more concerned with learning how to survive and thrive in Amazonia. Both would-be owners of massive properties and smallholding squatters are equally unsure about what form future state regulations might take, but all colonists are confident that addressing tenure confusion is a high priority in emerging development programs backed by the state and its allies. From their own perspective, property-making emerges as a key method residents use to confront this uncertainty: property becomes a practice and an idiom through which settlers come to know and hope to speak for the region. In this strange colonial register, property momentarily becomes less a device for accumulating territory, and is rather much more about articulating the emerging material realities of living in a remote region to regimes of possible future governance.

As property-making draws them into familiarity with local landscapes and opportunities, colonists also assemble and reassemble their subjectivities along-the-way. Though we might expect squatters and ranchers to be natural enemies, their shared orientation toward future property regularization brings these actors into temporary alliances. Here, local knowledge is constructed through moving around and building personal relationships with other regional actors—a process that results in shared perspectives on the environment.

An example of this can be observed in recent collaborations among rural residents to present themselves as “ecological stewards” during planning meetings with state and NGO officials. In four years of seminars and focus groups discussing sustainable development, loggers, ranchers, and smallholders presented a unified front as they learned the contours of environmentalist discourses.¹⁶ The state’s plans to pave the Br-163 in a “sustainable and participatory manner” had brought officials and environmental NGOs to Castelo in an attempt to solicit community buy-in to a regional development plan. Responding to computer models that predicted dire deforestation rates in a “business as usual scenario,” government technocrats were determined to use the paving of the Br-163 to introduce basic features of governance into the region and forestall the typical frontier dynamics of deforestation and social exploitation. During many participatory meetings in Castelo, visiting state planners tried to build consensus around environmental governance themes, but eventually these visitors grew suspicious of colonists’ performances. Officials were expecting *gaúchos* and *nordestinos* to be adversaries in their interactions with the state—an expectation informed perhaps by the history of violence and social strife along other Amazonian highways. In response to Castelenses’ united front in which they presented themselves as “stewards of the forest,” visiting planners concluded that roadside communities were merely “going through the motions” in sustainability planning.¹⁷ However, it would be incorrect—or at least incomplete—to infer from settlers’ stagings that they were only cynically conspiring to capture concessions from the state. Instead, we have

to understand residents' willingness to embrace sustainability in a larger regional context: environmental planning represents a latter-day opportunity, a possible chance, for residents to establish legitimacy for their claims in the region. This is not a simple matter of greenwashing: the seeking out of new partnerships and the mastering of environmentalist scripts are not so different from a rancher learning how to cut and monitor picadas, or a squatter learning how to forge title deeds with crickets. In participatory meetings, Br-163 colonists saw the emergence of new governance possibilities in terms of their long-standing experience in the region.

This experience, then, is colored by the property-making game and the process of localization that arises from it. Take one example—of the gaúcho farmer and his nordestino neighbor whom I visited in June 2011 during the burning season in southwestern Pará. Although these two claimants had squabbled for years over property lines and stretches of trees, Brazil's concerns over climate change mitigation had finally united them. As they watched the woods on their properties burn, they affirmed that their latest orientation toward the future was in keeping with emerging environmental governance regimes. These men and their families explained to me through the smoky haze that they had decided to conjoin their adjacent lots and embark on an ambitious reforestation program. Ironically, to qualify for this reforestation scheme, they had razed and set fire to 200 hectares of forest, in an unfortunate scenario that they planned to blame on a neighboring rancher known for letting pasture fires blaze out of control. With a story in place for why the forest was gone, the families hoped to participate in a REDD program—Reducing Emissions through Deforestation and Forest Degradation—an initiative that has achieved some success lately with reforestation efforts in Indonesia and Tanzania. REDD programs compensate forest owners who can show that they have increased carbon sequestration on their lands. In late 2009, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) began two pilot programs to connect financial incentives generated in the global carbon market with Amazonian proprietors.

After learning of TNC's REDD pilot program, the nordestino and gaúcho families devised an ingenious scheme that it took many meetings for me to work out. First, they put aside any bad blood between them and began to work together to make property claims that would fit with what they understood to be the mechanics of TNC's REDD program. The families then set fire to their holdings to erase earlier picada trails and to reset the lot's carbon load to zero, thereby enabling multiple tons of future CO₂ sequestration over the coming decades. Next, they drew up a contract in which the gaúcho agreed to be the minor partner in a corporation comprised of the holdings formerly in dispute, leaving the nordestino to be the principal client in a future titling scheme with TNC or the Brazilian state. To make the conjoined lot appear to have been legitimately purchased from a real estate firm, the families printed deeds and buried them with crickets (see Figure 3). After I had finally convinced him to show me his new "old" property papers, the nordestino



Figure 3 Forged title deeds on a homesteader's wall, July 2011 (photo by author).

quickly spirited them into a drawer that was then firmly locked, and he began to show me the shiny new satellite-generated map that indicates the boundaries of the corporation's proposed reforestation project. He proudly stated that a TNC fieldworker had given him this map just a week before.

To my nordestino friend, the map represented a speculative future that is marked by technocratic procedures, periodic payments for forest improvements, and a rising sense of locals' participation in global environmental concerns. These things are real for rural migrants, but at the moment they are not strictly motivated by possible financial benefits associated with reforestation or carbon sequestration. Instead, these settlers' actions—destroying a forest in order to speak for a future forest—should be understood as a distinctly local appropriation of globally circulating idioms and practices of environmental governance. Climate change, just as crickets and picadas, is another tool for making property along the Br-163, and residents come to the rhetorics of climate change neither as a cast of newly converted environmentalists nor as investors looking for a financial windfall. The gaúcho put it succinctly “Without clear land title, you cannot prove ownership and sell the forest's carbon.” In this statement, a colonialist vision of extractivism frames the future forest's carbon as a salable commodity, but the emphasis is on the motivating force of property. It is clear land title that these schemers are pursuing, and in the latest push for environmental and economic planning along the

highway, lining up for climate change mitigation is seen as a means to this end. While no one knows if or when REDD programs will result in direct payments to rural Amazonians (see Fearnside 2011), these colonists are actively anticipating a future governance possibility, and have literally staked their claim on it. From a distance, this looks like a tragically avoidable—and even absurd—deforestation scenario. From up close, however, roadside residents have burned this forest to solidify their property claim, while simultaneously inserting themselves as willing participants in environmental governance plans. In the context of widespread tenure uncertainty, settlers look to property—even as it remains a fluid set of practices and improvisations—as an instrument for participating in future territorial dispositions.

Speculative Accumulation: Prolepsis in Environmental Governance

My ethnography of development politics along an unpaved road in the Brazilian Amazon led me to closely examine the environmental, economic, and ideological aspects of property-making. In contrast to the typical picture of colonists using property logics to accumulate land and extract wealth, migrants along the Br-163 experiment with a range of property-making practices as a means to anticipate and influence the future establishment of a governance regime. Settlers are fixated on property because they remain dedicated to a colonial transformation of Amazonia, but their improvised territorial claims also bring them into intimate and surprising relations with their surrounding environments, and this localization process changes their perspectives on relating to the state and regional outsiders. I offer these arguments neither to glorify colonists, nor to offer justifications for their worldviews. Rather, it has been my aim to confront the empirical realities of this arrested frontier region, and to further our understanding of the sociocultural aspects of establishing capitalist frontiers in the developing world. The environmental and cultural transformations currently taking place in Amazonia rely in part on both the idea and effective emplacement of property as an alienable and severable object; but this process of turning nature into a commodity is not an evenly unfolding one, nor is it an inevitable function of the structural evolution of capitalism.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the concept introduced earlier in this article and the process described throughout: “speculative accumulation.” The reference here is to Marx’s grappling with the secret of primitive accumulation, which he revealed to be the initial violence at the heart of capitalism—the dirty secret that its liberal chroniclers tried to efface from history. Primitive accumulation is so called because it is the first swipe of accumulation that kicks off the ever-expanding nature of capitalism. By the late-20th century, regulation theorists

and Marxist geographers were theorizing the current stage of capitalism as being defined by “flexible accumulation,” in which communication technology allows money and surplus to move effortlessly around the world (see Harvey 1989). My intervention here is not to formulate a “new” period in this evolution of global capitalism, but rather to analyze the sociocultural specificity of capitalist formations. In this sense, I am deploying “speculative accumulation” in a similar fashion to others’ use of “spectacular accumulation,” that is, to name and analyze how capitalism emerges as a processual cultural project, and how its practitioners become acutely aware of the appearances of wealth, accumulation, and success (Tsing 2005). With “speculative accumulation,” then, I am highlighting what happens when would-be capitalists anticipate and attempt to influence emerging state and market regimes.

A possible touchstone for elaborating this concept is Louis Althusser’s notion of “aleatory materialism” (2006:198–202).¹⁸ Althusser points out that Marx (1992) understood the nonteleological nature of capital accumulation in the latter’s account of primitive accumulation. In his response to Marx’s famous discussion of the enclosure of the commons, Althusser contends that history emerges in contingent encounters (i.e., the *aleatory*: accidents, entanglements, brief incidents) that come to have a false sense of solidity in most historical analysis. Alienated property, he implies, is assumed to be the foundation of capitalist social formations; this assumption has so infiltrated our historical analyses that it has become difficult to think of social relations that might be determined by factors other than the conventional theory of property and dispossession that follows from classical primitive accumulation. It is the very stability of property in history—and the forward directionality that property’s alienation implies, leading to future accumulation and expansion—that colonists have in mind as they pursue property-making in rural Amazonia. Yet, describing their halting, inventive, and vernacular strategies as examples of primitive accumulation draws the curve of history too smoothly, and misses the opportunity to question how the accidental, improvised, and speculative give rise to the material conditions for future accumulation.

Speculative accumulation will be realized only if certain events take place. For rural Amazonians, this means if carbon markets develop, or if environmental regulation is forgiving, or if the state regularizes property claims. It is not instantly realizable accumulation, or even predictable: no one knows, although they can guess, as to yields, rents, and profits. In this sense, speculative accumulation is like any form of speculation: you place bets, you wait and see. But in another sense—and this is what distinguishes speculative accumulation—waiting around for things to develop (the “ifs” above) is not enough. Colonists engaging in speculative accumulation have begun to act as if certain future market and governance conditions are imminent. Colonists are not certain that their strategies will work,

but they exhibit an understanding that they must appear to be with the program: thus, the varied forms of jockeying pursued by settlers, as described above. In acting as if their activities are compatible with environmental regulations, settlers have begun to influence the very shape that a more robust state presence in the region will have.

In rural Amazonia, property-making is not deployed to mark and accumulate property, because the overwhelming consensus is that the infrastructure (laws, rentability, reliable markets) that makes accumulation possible is not yet in place. There remain many possibilities for how capitalism will consolidate resources and modes of accumulation, so colonists establish themselves to participate in a variety of future scenarios. They are, in a very real sense, accumulating the abilities to move forward in multiple future scenarios; rather than speculating only on cows, or carbon, or land itself, these claimants are keeping their options open. In speculative accumulation, the terms of history can always be revised to fit with likely future regulations or scenarios for growth. Titles can be forged or revised, boundary paths can be shifted or erased, and alliances can be made or dashed: these are the resources that colonists use to preserve their chances of fitting with future growth schemes.

I am not suggesting that these peculiar colonists are uninterested in accumulating Amazonian lands as such; indeed, my data suggest that regardless of socioeconomic standing, these settlers wish to acquire as much land as possible in order to produce commodities or extract prime materials. Speculative accumulation can and should be seen as an instrumental means to the acquisition of property and the future rents that can be extracted from it. The distinction that I am interested in exploring is the agency of low-level actors—including their experiences of landscape and the tools they fashion along the way—in giving rise to property as a stable institution. This process necessarily entails speculation as to which methods will work, and which configurations of land and documents and representational practices will last into the future.¹⁹ Here, I am drawing attention to a moment in the prehistory of accumulation, when the material and historical terms for future market dynamics are set through a surprisingly open process of invention and improvisation through which colonists make property legible. In wielding the tools of property, rural Castelenses do not immediately accumulate land and begin to extract profits and rent from it. But through speculative accumulation they do position themselves to speak for the region and come to have influence over extractive regimes in the future. This final point is important because the relatively isolated colonists I have described in this article are not the only actors anticipating growing wealthy along the Br-163 highway: agribusiness, mining, and other large sectors await future plans as well. “Flexible accumulation” may be fitting to describe how these large, multinational players are sizing up Amazonia as a resource frontier, but for long-term colonists in Castelo de Sonhos, “speculative

accumulation” names the tools and the dispositions through which relatively marginal actors look to remain relevant in the region.

Colonists pursuing speculative accumulation are self-consciously aware of the hinge that has yet to be put in place linking land/properties to history: colonists live in (and through their speculations produce) wild, unsettled country that will only in the future be regulated and incorporated into the state and market (see Rose 2004). By tending to trails and forging papers, colonists in Castelo de Sonhos are preparing for possibilities, and trying to fit a range of possibilities for governance. This prolepsis—a foreshadowing, an enactment of something in the future as if it were accomplished fact—is crucial to the replicating of capitalism in expansive frontiers.²⁰ With their concern for property’s future legibility and durability, these colonists are creating the conditions for familiar state and market forms to “settle” the frontier. To the Brazilian government, property is both the problem (in that there is tenure confusion) and the solution to the challenges of environmental governance in Amazonia. Severable, alienable, and salable property—a goal of nordestino and gaúcho speculators alike—is now thoroughly embedded in state plans, and teams are currently drawing and redrawing cadastral maps throughout Amazonia. The days of fake papers and furtive trails are probably numbered, but their proleptic effects have played and continue to play a role in shaping the terms for state and market reforms in the region.

Speculation and anticipatory gestures are important ways in which people act and through which landscapes are transformed. As ethnographers, we need to pay close attention to anticipatory gestures, both as a matter of theorizing the emergence of capital and statecraft in a frontier zone, but also as a means for understanding how environmentalism itself is being woven into capitalist designs and local responses to possibilities for governance.²¹ Ethnography of the development encounter brings local communities more squarely into the picture as historical subjects and reveals their roles in the construction of globally circulating ideas and practices. Here, I have shown how property emerges for colonists via a restless localization of intense physicalities and anticipation. Colonists are rooting themselves in histories and materialities along the road, and this is not a simple process of either environmental destruction or the emergence of a new army of ecological stewards. To understand it better, we must pay close attention to how colonists bring property to life, both as a means to transform and accumulate territories, but also as a fluid category that settlers wield as they anticipate future possibilities.

Notes

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²Northeasterners and southerners predominate in the study region due to recent colonization efforts, but more established populations (river-dwelling *ribeirinhos*, indigenous groups including the Kayapó and Panará, and remnants of 19th-century rubber-tapping communities [*seringueiros*]) also form part of the social scene, although these communities are not centered on the highway.

³I have written previously about the efforts to pave this highway as a model of sustainable and participatory development: see Campbell (2012). See also the work of Stephen Perz et al. (2008) for a critical appraisal of road building in the Brazilian Amazon.

⁴As of early 2013, a paved road has arrived to the north of Castelo de Sonhos (Castle of Dreams) to service the logging town of Novo Progresso (New Progress).

⁵For example, see Doolittle (2005) Verdery (2003), and Verdery and Humphrey (2004).

⁶That four times the acreage of the state is claimed in title agencies is in part the result of Brazil's industry of private title houses, *cartórios*, the owners of which have an interest in registering as many claims as possible; see Brito and Baretto (2011) and Brazil (2001).

⁷Lewis H. Morgan (1877) wrote "A critical knowledge of property would embody, in some respects, the most remarkable portion of the mental history of humankind."

⁸Until the late 1990s, homesteading claimants in Brazil were almost exclusively male, since the assumed-male "head of household" was considered the sole beneficiary and registered owner of the parcel. Agrarian reform legislation and policies have since become gender-neutral. In this article, I use both the male and female pronouns interchangeably to refer to anonymous homesteaders.

⁹See Almeida (1992), Fearnside (2001), and Schmink and Wood (1992) among others.

¹⁰The exact etymology—and broader social history—of "grilagem" is uncertain. As James Holston has discussed (2008:139, 337n40), purveyors of falsified deeds were instrumental in the concentration of land among São Paulo elites during the 19th and early-20th centuries. "Grilagem" is also known to have been practiced in the sertão region of northeastern Brazil in the late-19th century (Velho 1982).

¹¹*Carpentaria acuminata* and *Terminaliaamazonia*, respectively.

¹²This insight is based on 15 real estate transactions that I was able to confirm in interviews and participant-observation between 2004 and 2007. None of these transactions are publicly recorded, which perhaps limits any firm conclusions about the state of the land market. Still, a land market (albeit a small one) existed in Castelo, and it was widely commented upon that, even with high Brazilian *real* and minimal inflation, land values were dropping in the region as expressed in sales prices.

¹³The federal land agency, INCRA (Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform), is the bureaucracy responsible for the titling of lands along federal highways in Amazonia. The only functioning INCRA office in western Pará is located in Santarém, and as a result INCRA offers few services to claimants alongside the unpaved portions of the Br-163 in southwestern Pará.

¹⁴Field interview, Castelo de Sonhos, March 12, 2007.

¹⁵For example, Wolford's excellent account (2010) of the expansion of the landless workers' movement (MST) from southern to northeastern Brazil features several examples of outright conflicts between well-organized squatters and landowners.

¹⁶Hoelle (2012:70) describes a similar phenomenon of ranchers and large-scale farmers in Acre "softening" their former hardline opposition to environmental management policies.

¹⁷From 2005 through 2007, state officials and ecological NGOs partnered to create a "sustainable development plan" for the Br-163 highway region, and sought the input of residents throughout the

region. I attended meetings between state officials and local communities, and found that both sides became disaffected with one another over possible zoning regulations, the pace and priority of the road paving project, and the ultimate status of residents' land claims. The sustainable development plan for the Br-163 Highway was completed, but shelved at the recommendation of the Minister of the Environment. See Baletti (2012) and Simmons et al. (2009) for discussions of similar participatory planning scenarios in Amazonia.

¹⁸Although left undeveloped before Althusser's death, "aleatory materialism" was intended as a correction to Marxist assumptions that "primitive accumulation" had already happened, long ago, with the enclosures of commonly held territories (such as the English sheepwalks chronicled in ch. 27 of *Capital* vol. 1). He argued that primitive accumulation is an ongoing process, defined by encounters and contingencies. Recently, anthropologists (see Verdery and Humphrey 2004) have taken up this perspective in their analyses of intellectual property, genomics, patents, the privatization of public assets, and neoliberalism more generally.

¹⁹For a rich history of the various technologies that speculators have used to make property in settler societies, see John C. Weaver's *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World* (2003).

²⁰Eric Worby has used the concept to great effect in his analysis of interactions between the state and agrarian reform clients in Zimbabwe (2000). Prolepsis can indicate a foreshadowing, a preemptive rebuttal (as in an argument), or an insisting on the present (and impossible) state of something bound to happen in the future. Deeds and property lines perform a kind of prolepsis, as do strategic interactions with state planners.

²¹Rather than contending that proposals for environmental governance or infrastructure reform are inspiring speculation and deforestation (as some have argued—see Brazil [Fed. IWG 2001]), my effort here is to understand a culture of speculation, of making things in advance, which is actually at the heart of environmental governance. Colonists' speculations influence the shape that governance takes. It may be the case that the prospect of environmental governance is inspiring rampant land speculation "before it's too late," but what I am suggesting here is that speculation is a structuring presence that is shaping governance possibilities. Rather than understanding speculation as the object of government and market reform, here we see it working as a fundamental component of the logic and practice of frontier governance.

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