Chapter 2.

Ore Sy Guazu: Inhabiting dispossession – the Guarani Oga Guazu and its tale of belonging

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the value of community in Guarani cosmology, and how a dwelling structure like the 'Oga Guazu', (which in Coast Salish territories, Turtle Island, has an analogy with the 'Long houses") can give not only a physical space of refuge and protection but also become an entity fuelled by the souls of its inhabitants. The chapter introduces words in the author's native Guarani language to delve into the significance of the 'Teko Porã', 'el buen vivir' which means good living as a sustainable form of life. The author aims to present to readers the Guarani cosmology as an alternative way of *Homefullness*. Before colonization, the 'Oga Guazu', or 'big house', was the communal home for the Guarani people, where the 'Teko Porã' created a space of belonging. Where land, language, and dwelling meant being of the land and 'being with' others in reciprocity, responsibility and relational accountability to ancestral ways of knowing and being that are intrinsically imbricated with practices of care to our 'Sy Guazu' or Mother earth.

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The Guarani Oga Guazu and its tale of belonging

In Guarani cosmology, we have two souls, the soul of the body: 'ã', and the soul of the spirit: 'ñe', which means language, 'sound with sense'.

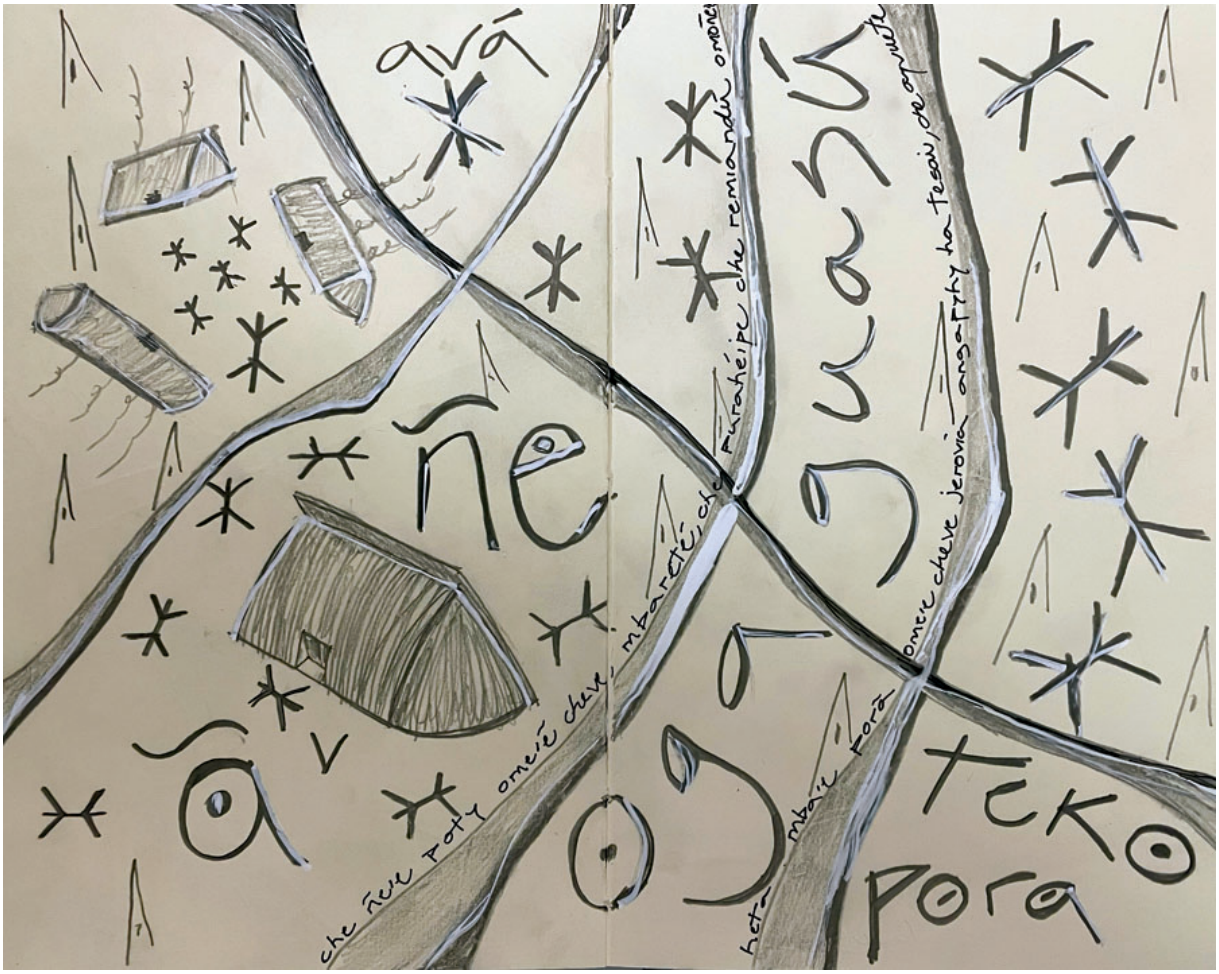
The Teko Porã: 'el buen vivir' or good living (Figure 1.1) is the Guaraní way of living, where the two souls coexist through an embodied experience with the land.

The Teko Porã acknowledges the plurality of meanings of a world of many worlds. The 'ñe', which also means language, is the soul of the spirit. Through relational accountability, this spirit connects to our 'Sy Guazu', our mother earth. This soul is in the throat and expresses itself in an embodied practice through speaking, singing, praying, dancing, and reflecting. It represents and asserts Guarani cosmology's unequivocal and unalterable unity of soul, body, and spirit. Before colonisation, the 'Oga Guazu' was the communal dwelling where the 'Teko Pora' was lived and experienced, creating a space of belonging. Land, language, and dwelling meant being of the land and 'being with' others in reciprocity, responsibility, and care for ancestral ways of knowing and being that are intrinsically imbricated with practices of care to our 'Sy Guazu' or Mother Earth.

Through many centuries of colonisation and the displacement of the Guarani peoples from their lands, this type of communal space was lost as a dwelling. The colonial structures of power transformed and 'westernised' the Guarani home.

In this chapter, I want to analyse the value of community in Guarani cosmology and how the example of a structure like the 'Oga Guazu' can not only give a physical space of refuge and

protection but also become an entity fuelled by the souls of its inhabitants. Introducing words in my native Guarani language and delving into the significance of the ‘Teko Pora’, ‘el buen vivir’, which means good living as a sustainable form of life, I want to present to the readers, the Guarani cosmology as an alternative way of *Homefullness*.



<Figure 2.1. here>

Figure 2.1. Representation of the Guarani ‘Teko Porã’. Drawing in white, black ink and graphite with words in Guarani language. Image by the author, 2024.

The Oga Guazu: A Space of Belonging and Reciprocity

Before the Spanish ‘conquistadores’ arrived, the Oga Guazu, or ‘big house’, stood as the most essential structure in Guarani communities. More than a physical dwelling, the Oga Guazu represented a communal space where Teko Porã lived in its most profound expression. In the Oga Guazu, the Guarani people lived in reciprocity, responsibility, and care for one another, embodying ancestral knowledges and a deep connection to the land. The structure itself was impregnated with the souls of its inhabitants, transforming it into a living entity that reflected the Guarani collective ethos. Another significant value of the Guarani way of living is the practice of ‘jopoi’, which means reciprocity. Jo – exchange – po – hand – i – open. An open exchange of values, goods and ideas. ‘Jopoi’ meant to prioritise relationships over material possessions and celebrate the interconnectedness of all life.

The significance of the Oga Guazu can be understood through its parallels to other Indigenous communal dwellings, such as the longhouses of the Coast Salish territories on the Pacific coast of Turtle Island. Both structures served as refuge, protection, and cultural continuity spaces where Indigenous peoples practised ceremonies, storytelling, and communal living. The Oga Guazu, therefore, was not just a home but a sacred entity that upheld the unity of land, spirit, and community. Each structure held between six and thirty families, with sizes ranging from fifteen to forty meters long (Rios Cabrera, 2016), and each family congregated around internal communal fires, where the food and ceremonies were prepared and celebrated. Depending on their size, Guarani communities could have many Oga Guazu, typically assembled around a communal central open space. The Guarani peoples lived for millennia in vast territories comprising the basin of the rivers Paraguay, Parana and Uruguay, the Xingu and the Amazonas and Negro rivers (Rios Cabrera, 2016).

These communities had a socio-political organisation based on the values of the Teko Porã, in which the search for the ‘Yvy – maraguey’, the land with no evil, was the final quest.

The Oga Guazu homes were built of materials from the forest, such as wood logs, ‘takuara’, also known as bamboo, and covertures made of hay and different plant leaves. They were tied with lianas in basketry-like designs. These structures were meant to decay with time, and the Guarani people were used to moving to other locations in their territories, which also allowed for equitable and balanced use of the natural gifts that Mother Earth would offer them to sustain their communities. As Paraguayan scholar Dr Aristides Escobar (2008) notes, ‘Community continuity is guaranteed through the superposition of recurring cycles along with the punctual occupation of sites at fixed times. The spatial arrangement acquires the aura that gives magical religious meanings.’ It speaks of a connection to the land as a living spiritual entity.

Colonisation and the Loss of the Oga Guazu as a dwelling

> Indigenous peoples see the manifestations of violence as symptoms of a deeper and older form of violence that happens in ontological and metaphysical realms – the realm of ‘being’. This deeper, older violence is the imposed sense of separation between ourselves and the dynamic living land – metabolism that is the planet and beyond, as well as the theological separation between creature and creator. This imposed sense of separation, or separability, is based on ‘human exceptionalism’, the idea that humans are a superior species that deserve to conquer, dominate, own, manage and control the natural environment. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021)

I understand that this human-centred paradigm fuels modernity with social constructs such as race and gender, which constitute tools to sustain until these days the colonial powers of domination. This modern paradigm opposes every aspect of the plural – ontological cosmology of the Guarani peoples. Hence the pervasive effort of ‘democratic’ and ‘modern’ governments to continue eroding the Guarani sovereignty over their lands.

Paraguayan architect Silvio Rios Cabrera (2016) notes that the last ‘Oga Guazu’ documented dates approximately to the 1970s. The impacts of colonisation disrupted not only the physical landscapes of Indigenous communities but also the relationships that defined their existence. The displacement of the Guarani people from their ancestral lands led to the erasure of dwellings like the Oga Guazu, which once served to form spaces of belonging and reciprocity. The question, ‘How and when did we become homeless?’ thus resonates deeply within this context. For the Guarani, the concept of home is not limited to a physical structure but extends to the relational and spiritual ties that connect them to the land and each other.

To become ‘homeless’ in this sense is to experience a rupture in the balance of the two souls – the ã and the ñe – and to lose the embodied practices that sustain the Teko Porã. Without a communal dwelling like the Oga Guazu, the soul of the spirit struggles to find expression, and the unity of body, soul, and spirit is disrupted. This loss highlights the broader impacts of colonial violence, which sought to dismantle Indigenous systems of relational accountability and replace them with Western notions of individualism, materialism, and ‘development’ justified as a modern advancement by colonial hegemonies of power whose ultimate goal is to exploit land and people.

Despite the massive extermination of Guarani peoples and communities, the Oga Guazu ethos is still alive today in a handful of spaces called ‘Opy’ or ‘Oga Jekutu’. These spaces are places of worship and Guarani spirituality, where people gather for ceremonies and governance reunions. They correspond with the structures of the Oga Guazu and serve to maintain the practice of Teko Porã in sacred communal spaces. They have become spaces where singing, praying, chanting, and invoking ancestors are acts of resistance against constant and continuing colonial violence.

The Oga Guazu is also a repository of the numinous sense of the Guarani language: ‘ñe’. The numinous rhetorical language transcends to a space in which the human sense imbricates with the notion of human spirituality as a limen to a world where words live in the plurality of multiple meanings. This plurality conveys the onto-cosmological aspect of the Teko Porã.

Indigenous Guarani leader and activist Alba Eragui writes a poem in Guarani that speaks to this onto-cosmological aspect of the Guarani way of being when she says: “che ‘ñe’ê’ poty ome’ê cheve mbarete, che purahéipe, che remiandu omoñe’ê. Heta mba’e porâ ome’ê cheve jerovia, angapyhy ha tesaî, che ayvuete ha che reko rupive.” These words mean: ‘My words give me strength, my song, a soulful gift that delivers. So much beauty has given me truth, faith, and health from my true word, from my living’ (Eragui in Guzman, 2023).

For non-Indigenous societies, the Guarani emphasis on the sacredness of language offers an important lesson: how we speak – and what we speak of – matters. Language has the power to heal, connect, and transform. By honouring the role of language in creating belonging, we can reimagine the world as a space where every being – human and non-human – has a voice and a place.

Through speaking, singing, storytelling, and prayer, the ñe connects humans to their community, their ancestors, other beings that are more than humans, and our Sy Guazu, our mother Earth. In this sense, language becomes a form of dwelling – a way of being at home within oneself and the world.

Jopoi – reciprocity as a Foundation for *Homefullness*

The Guarani cosmology, mainly through the lens of the Teko Porã, offers a holistic framework for reimagining ‘home’ not just as a physical place but as a dynamic, relational space. In a world struggling with alienation, ecological destruction, and disconnection, the Guarani worldview invites us to engage with a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable approach to being and dwelling in the world.

The concept of ‘Homefullness’ goes beyond having a shelter; it signifies a sense of belonging, purpose, and connection. For the Guarani people, this belonging is profoundly relational and reciprocal – it is found in their connection to our Sy Guazu (Mother Earth). Unlike Western paradigms that often separate humans from nature, Guarani cosmology asserts that humans are not independent from the land but instead of the land. As a living entity, the land provides sustainment, shelter, and spiritual grounding. In this cosmology, home exists wherever relationships of jopoi – reciprocity and care – live.

The Oga Guazu exemplifies this idea. It is not simply a house but an embodied space. Guarani people’s relational accountability to each other and to the land transforms the Oga Guazu into a living, breathing entity. It is fuelled not by individual ownership but by collective care and mutual responsibility. As an alternative to capitalist modes of ownership and extraction, the Oga Guazu is a *Homefullness* model that prioritises relational harmony over material accumulation.

As Hanna Arendt (2018) argues, ‘the common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common with those who live with us and those who were here before and with those who will come after us.’ Citing a western paradigm, I want to analyse the Teko Porã within the context of our shared humanity and the plurality of meanings that our mother earth allows us to convey. We live in a ‘world of many worlds’ that the western gaze has tried to hide and demise. The conspicuous notion of a single modern view of the world, emphasised by capitalist societies, turned the ontological perception of the world towards a simplistic definition of multiculturalism and the assimilation of dominant cultures. Languages and cultures are lost and confused within the capitalist western proposition. Humanity is displaced from the realities of the world. Modern industrial societies have disrupted our relationship with the land through exploitation and disconnection. The ecological crises facing the world today are symptoms of this severance.

Guarani cosmology offers an alternative path that sees the land not as a resource to be consumed but as a mother to be cared for. By embracing ‘jopoi’, we can reimagine a relationship with the land that is not extractionist and allow emergent connections among beings. The Oga Guazu becomes a physical and symbolic representation of this reciprocity. Its reconstruction requires collective labour and shared responsibility, reminding us that home is not built in isolation but through relationships of care. By reclaiming the Oga Guazu, the Guarani people demonstrate that home is a place to live and a practice of living in balance with our ‘common’ world. Therefore, the principle of jopoi – reciprocity is essential to worlding our world.

Towards a world of many worlds

I argue that if we start listening to the language of our lands that speak the words of our ‘Sy Guazu,’ our mother earth, ‘futuring’, and ‘worlding’, our world is possible. And then, as Indigenous leader Ayrton Krenak (2020) says: ‘We can have more stories to tell and postpone the demise of our world’. Indigenous cosmologies around the world have manifested that what is common and intrinsic to being human is the undeniable relationship that we have with the lands that make us and sustain us. These relationships and languages mark the identities the modern world wants us to forget. Ayrton Krenak also explains that his nation’s name: ‘Krenak’ means ‘kre’, as head and ‘nak’, which means land. He continues by saying: ‘Krenak is the legacy of our forebears, the memory of our origins, which we identify as our ‘headland’, as a humanity that cannot understand itself without the connection, this deep-set communion with the land’. Like the Guarani people, the Krenak people’s cosmology is of the land and with the land as a being.

Another example of how being human is imbricated with a spiritual relationship to the land is what Dr. Yoko Akama (2017) portrays when she introduces the ‘Ise Jingu’ temple structure that has been rebuilt every 20 years for the past 2000 years. It is an extraordinary human effort that has preserved and honoured the teachings and knowledge of Ise’s Indigenous Shinto Japanese

peoples' ancestors. It is about re-birth, care, and relations in the realm of the tangible and intangible of the body and the spirits. She argues that 'Shinto, Zen Buddhism and Indigenous cosmology sees entanglements with life force, gods, spirits, souls, totems, and ancestors that cannot be severed – dimensions often considered with suspicion, exoticism, and mysticism by some rational thinkers – that has become an absent presence. This interdependent worldview teaches us to be respectful and responsive as a condition of living'.

The many worlds we inhabit speak their truth when we recognise Mother Earth as a living being. Through that recognition, we also see other beings, humans and more-than-humans, in a reciprocal and plural relationship.

The Guarani way of life embraces a world of many worlds – a plurality of meanings, relationships, and ways of being. This cosmology challenges the homogenising forces of colonisation and globalisation, which persist in imposing a singular worldview. Instead, the Guarani cosmology celebrates our plurality, interconnectedness, and relational accountability. The Oga Guazu, as a manifestation of the Guarani way of being and living, becomes a space where multiple worlds can coexist in harmony.

Proposing Guarani cosmology as an alternative way of *Homefullness* is not about imposing a single solution but about learning from Indigenous ways of knowing and being. It is an invitation to reimagine the world as a shared home, where every relationship – whether with the land, the spirit, or each other – guides us by principles of reciprocity, care, and respect.

In times of ecological crisis and social fragmentation, the Guarani worldview offers a path toward healing and reconnection. We can restore balance and belonging by embracing Teko Porã, honouring jopoi, and creating spaces for languages to thrive. The Oga Guazu serves as both a model and a reminder that home is not just a physical place but a way of living and worlding within our shared world.

Through the wisdom of the Guarani people, we can learn to world the world – to create *Homefullness* based on reciprocity, relational accountability, and care. In doing so, we honour not only the Guarani way of life but also the interconnectedness that sustains all life on Mother Earth.

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