

(Yerba) Mate is bittersweet:
Narrating the power, silences and changes of history

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Abstract

Yerba mate is a tree that can only be grown in the Selva Paranaense region, located across the colonial borders between Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil. Its leaves are used to prepare an infusion that is widely consumed in these countries. In Argentina, the average annual consumption of yerba mate is 6 kilos per person. The country is the main exporter and the one with most hectares destined for yerba mate production in total. But why do Argentinians drink so much yerba mate? Many yerba mate drinkers ignore the Indigenous origins of the drink. Currently the yerba mate industry is associated with specific socio-environmental problems related to the way yerba mate is produced, consumed, and commercialized. I argue that these issues are correlated with the present official narratives of yerba mate that have erased its Indigenous origins. This project explores, through narration or storytelling, the power, silences and changes in the official narratives of yerba mate from its origin to the current ways of consumption in Argentina and North America. These silences and challenges are a result of the process of colonization and the advance of the global capitalist model. The outcome of this project is a portfolio comprised of a written essay and a collection of audio-visual stories.

Keywords: colonisation, nation, identity-making, storytelling, power, official narrative

Foreword

This research project is the culmination of an academic journey that applies and contributes to the learning objectives I set at the beginning of the Master of Environmental Studies program. For my specific project I decided to create a portfolio that would satisfy not only the minimum written component required but also would propose a different way of doing research and creating knowledge.

I organized my plan of study in three areas of concentration: global production and consumption, environmental ethics, and embodiment through the arts. The learning objectives related to the first area of concentration were achieved through the following courses: *ecological economics* (3 credits), *ecological footprint accounting* as IDS (3 credits), *ecological footprint analytics* as IDS (3 credits), and field experience (3 credits). The learning objectives related to the second area of concentration were achieved through the following courses: *environmental education* (3 credits), *ecopsychology* as IDS (3 credits), and *animal worlds* as IDS (3 credits). Finally, the learning objectives related to the third area of concentration were achieved through the courses: *cultural production workshop: performance-based* (3 credits), *Arts in Actions* (3 credits), and *cultural production workshop: image* (3 credits). The minimum of 36 credits has been sufficed.

For the research-methodology course, *Arts in Action* and *Convergences, Disparities, and Fault lines: Research in Latin American and Caribbean Studies* have informed the research methodology of my final MES project.

(Yerba) Mate is bittersweet allowed me to integrate the wide diversity of courses, theories and scholars that I've navigated through for the past two years in a way that's meaningful and relevant to my life experience.

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Here is the link to the collection of audio-visual stories:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/adcf49df92ab4e7080339367222c6b1f>

From narrative to narration: theory and methodology of a yerba mate story

What are you drinking right now? If you are drinking something, do you know where it comes from? If you are not drinking, can you think of your favourite beverage and what about it makes it so special? Not long ago, a Bulgarian friend asked me what's the origin of yerba mate, and I didn't know. Needless to say, I have drunk (yerba) mate my whole life. There were many things about yerba mate I did not know, yet I had always said that drinking (yerba) mate was part of my *identity*. Why did I not know?

Have you ever wondered why you don't know something? I love to drink mate. I love to share mate with others. I know and care about the socio-environmental issues associated with yerba mate production, but the moment I was asked about the origin of the drink, I only had silence (and a terrible joke) for an answer. Why didn't I know about the origin? The contemplation of this question (and the absence of an answer) led me to construct the political context of my not knowing. I've heard many times in my life that we only know what we care about and that we care about only what we know. But I've always cared about mate. Is my caring not enough to know more or is it something else that shapes our knowledge? **This journey is an exploration of the power, silences and changes in the official narrative of (yerba) mate from its origin to the current ways of consumption in Argentina and Canada, in an effort to understand why I have ignored the Indigenous origin of the drink. As I take you with me on my journey, I hope to highlight how the power dynamics, the silences and the changes in the official narratives of (yerba) mate are connected to the socio-environmental issues the yerba mate industry presents today in the context of our current ecological crisis.**

In case it needs to be explained, mate is a South American infusion prepared from dry yerba mate leaves and hot or cold water, and we drink it through a metal straw. I will use the term “(yerba) mate” when I refer to both, the beverage and the leaves, at the same time.

The first thing that I needed to understand for this project was the relationship between (yerba) mate history and the stories I have been told about (yerba) mate. Trouillot (2015) complicates our understanding of history by proposing that ‘history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives’ (p. 25). He invites us to pay attention to the process of production of official

narratives. This, he argues will give us a better understanding of how power produces silences and absences in the making of history. He examines the story of Columbus. Columbus is a particular narrative that, above all, represents the history of the West from a European point of view, and every time it is told, it unfolds a series of twists depending on where it lands. These twists represent how power is constantly negotiated, of course within the limits of unequal socio-economic structures. By saying what Columbus was, we are saying what Columbus was not. In my project, I've explored official stories of (yerba) mate in the colonial and postcolonial periods to recognize how power plays out in the making of these narratives. This is important because it allowed me to examine how the Indigenous origins of (yerba) mate were pushed to the margin through a series of narrations about the European arrival and the assimilation of the (yerba) mate drinking habit, the Jesuits and the Guaraní missions, the yerba mate business for exports, the reconstruction of a new (and whiter) national identity through *blanqueamiento* ideology, the influx of white immigrants, Argentina as an export player in the neoliberal model, and yerba mate beyond national roots.

Not all experiences make it to the official version of history, so what I needed to do next was to understand what happened to the people and the land where yerba mate is and has been grown all these centuries. I used specific arguments and theories from Kröger and Hage to attempt to explore the nature of the absent's experience. Kröger (2022) explains that Western ways of understanding living ecosystems, and therefore their destruction, are often mechanistic and reductionist, and the existence of the lost individuals, species, connections and relations are left out in the shadows. By turning absence into existence, I was able to explore within the official narrative of yerba mate extraction the 'destruction, death, and disintegration extractivism actually cause' (p. 27). But to meaningfully make sense of the experience of the lost, I grounded my reasoning in Hage's (2017) concept of generalized domestication. This concept has been employed to understand how colonial racism and the domination of "nature" present common generative mechanisms. I don't personally subscribe to the term "nature" since it often leads one to theorize about something that's *out there*. We are nature too. But Hage's theorization of generalized domestication is a wonderful tool that guided my imagination in the quest for answers related to the silences of (yerba) mate history. Generalized domestication 'is a mode of inhabiting the world through dominating it for the purpose of making it yield value: material or symbolic forms of sustenance, comfort, aesthetic pleasure, and so on' (Hage, 2017, p. 62). In this way of being in the world, the author does not deny that

there might be an experience of mutual benefit between the parties, but he stresses that the domesticated being that enters that relationship is not the same being that existed before the domestication process:

The capitalist-worker relation can be said to be of mutual benefit to both. But this presupposes and normalizes the transformation of people into laborers. The same can be said of slave relations, of patriarchal relations, and of colonizer-colonized relations (...) While there is clearly an element of truth in this, it is an experiential fact that some relations, despite being grounded in domination and exploitation, are nonetheless experienced as “mutually beneficial.” Experiencing domestication as being of mutual benefit does not stop it being a relation of power structurally grounded in the initial practices of capture and taming that initiated it (...) It is a relation of domination that aims to be lived as a relation of nondomination. Its appearance is not what hides its essence but is part of its essence. Domestication is after all a struggle to make things partake in the making of one's home. It is a struggle to create homely spaces or, to put it more existentially, a struggle to be “at home in the world.” Yet, paradoxically, it is also a mode of domination, control, extraction, and exploitation (Hage, 2017, p. 64).

I had to go from what I knew to what I didn't know about yerba mate, and that meant a historical trip to some point we call origin. These two authors helped me navigate this process by understanding how experiences change when the world changes, and the values that shape the new worlds created.

(Yerba) mate means different things for different people and its meaning has been changing for more than five hundred centuries in relation to the particular power relations in which it is located. Hall's (1997) work on representation helps us understand these changes. Hall's analysis of Fanon's essay on the ever-changing meaning of the veil as a symbol for Algerian women's resistance lets us understand that we 'can't abstract the cultural sign from its context, and that no cultural sign is fixed in its meaning' (Nash et al., 1996). My project mirrored his analysis of the veil in this sense; I explored how the symbol of (yerba) mate kept fluctuating depending on the context's changes. What happened to (yerba) mate was inevitable, and its meaning will keep on changing as power and context change regardless of how we try to control it.

I acknowledge that *meaning* is anthropocentric. Something that it's expected and inevitable. To extend my argument beyond anthropocentrism, I've placed the conversation of the changing meaning of (yerba) mate within the notions of yerba mate as a being whose existence cannot be reduced to human meaning.

The creation of a new narrative was the research method and the research outcome of this project. Through narration, or storytelling, I've analysed the official narratives of (yerba) mate, walking along with the authors previously mentioned. The story I'm narrating starts with this essay. The essay contains the literature review I conducted on the extensive number of authors that have written about the history of yerba mate from different angles and perspectives. Authors like Raú (2011), Gortari (2017, 2006), López (1974), Maeder (2009), Sarrael (2014) and Zang (2020) have contributed extensively to the (yerba) mate archive. While reading these multiple sources and thinking about my own experience, I noticed that the mainstream way of producing knowledge in academia perpetuates the exact things that scholars often criticize. It has nothing to do with the scholars though, the problem is the knowledge-creation method. That's the reason why my project doesn't end with an essay. This essay only sets the ground for a conversation about the present. At the end of this file, you will find a link to an ArcGIS StoryMap collection. I've chosen this software to contain the end of this story for its interactive and performative nature. Although this software was meant to bring aliveness to traditional and reductionist maps, I've found that it allowed me to establish a style of narration that invites the person on the other side to engage in a more meaningful way. After all, I'm writing a story about meaning. At the end of the collection, I placed the final piece of this project. This final piece is an immersive sonic performance comprised of a poem and an audio clip. This piece is the most important because it offers a conclusion that I could have never achieved hadn't I decided to employ an art-based methodology for my knowledge-creation process.

In spite of creative writing being excellent for accessing one's subjectivity (as words seem to unfold from nowhere, yet they are coming from somewhere), one needs to have *handy a rule of thumb* to prevent these words turning into *meanings* that could perpetuate more socio-environmental harm. This was central to my project since I attempted to theorize about the mainstream (yerba) mate stories I grew up listening to, and it would be unwise to believe that these stories don't longer live inside me. As I pondered upon the official narrative of (yerba) mate with

my writing, I drew on the work of DeLoughrey & Handley (2011) whose notion of postcolonial ecologies allowed me to avoid reducing history and ecology to one another, yet to exist in the space these two narratives offer. This was important to escape the delusional split between “human” and “natural” problems, and to advance a sense of justice that connect the human with the more-than-human.

The past in the present: back to the Selva

Why do we drink so much? According to the INYM, in 2021, in Argentina, the consumption rate of yerba mate grew from 5.9 kilos per person/per year in 2020 to 6.17 kilos per person/per year. The total domestic consumption increased 5.21% in comparison with the previous year, accounting for an intake of slightly more than 280 million kilos (INYM, 2022, p. 3). Argentina is the main global exporter of yerba mate, the country that has more hectares destined for yerba mate plantation in total, and it is the 2° global producer (after Brazil) (Agro-Industry Secretary, 2019). **Why do we produce and export so much?** Industrial yerba mate production fosters excessive use of herbicides like glyphosate and causes soil erosion and nutrient depletion due to a lack of cover-cropping in mono-cultivations (Dohrenwend, 2019, p. 56-57). These issues are highly correlated with the systemic social inequalities of the yerba mate industry: restricted land tenure, child labour, and the workers’ health risks (as discussed later).

Furthermore, a significant reduction of native forest has been reported between the 1998-2006 period due to, mainly, forest products (obtained from Eucalyptus and *Araucaria*) but also industrial plantations of yerba mate (UMSEF, 2008). According to Plací & Di Bitetti (2005), only approximately half of the native forest extended through the ecological region of Misiones and a small part of the northern Corrientes remain (p. 202). **Why, then, do we drink so much?**

There is a sweet spot that comes before the bitter judgment, that’s the spot of curiosity. I grew up drinking (yerba) mate and I love to share the experience with everyone I can. One day, I realized my love and interest for (yerba) mate had ignored uncomfortable aspects that were suddenly brought to my attention. Luckily, I got more interested in understanding the *whys* than in judging the *hows*. This research project is a result of what it means to inhabit the sweet spot that allows one to explore the bitter complexities of our lives. In the times of our unprecedented human-induced ecological crisis, I empathize with the burden and frustration others feel about what’s to

be done about things we don't even know enough about. The human, the non-human, and the more-than-human suffer alike the consequences of the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. Yerba mate has been part of the stories I tell myself about who I am. By understanding how these stories play out we might be able to re-write the stories that don't serve us any longer. After all, changing the world is about changing the stories.

Yerba mate, the Selva and the Guaraní

Before anything, it's important I repeat myself: yerba mate is the plant/herb/dry leaves and mate is the name of the infusion made out of yerba mate that one drinks through a metal straw. It's always confusing at first if you are not familiar with the beverage.

I grew up drinking mate since, in Argentina (where I was born and raised), mate is part of daily life. There is mate at work, mate at school, mate with friends, mate with the family after lunch, mate in solitude when there is no one around. My favourite occasions to share mate were on group-study sessions or when needed to share heartbroken stories with my friends at the *placita*. Mate is a social ritual. I grew up accepting mate as part of my identity and when I left Argentina my mate drinking habit came with me. The problem with the only story I knew about (yerba) mate was that it didn't help me when a friend asked me about the origin of the drink. *I guess nobody asks that back home because it's always enough with the belief that (yerba) mate is Argentine*. The story I'm going to tell you is the story nobody told me, and the one I wish I could've told my friend that day.

Yerba mate, or *Ilex paraguarensis*, is a tree that was and still is an important part of the Guaraní culture. The Guaraní are an Indigenous group of people who originally inhabited the region of South America surrounded by Paraná, Paraguay and Uruguay rivers, a region called Selva Paranaense. This is the only place where yerba mate grows, despite human efforts to grow it in other lands (Capellari et al., 2017, p. 14). Yerba mate played, for the Guaraní, important social and exchange roles (Gallero, 2019, p. 226). *Caá* was the word that the Guaraní used to refer to this type of *Ilex*, meaning 'plant or herb', and it's believed that the word mate derives from the Quechua *matí* (adopted probably as a result of the exchange of yerba mate between the Guaraní and the Incas) (Capellari, 2017, p.15, Folch, 2010, p.11). One of the Guaraní origin myths explains that:

Knowledge of the tree was revealed to a young woman who was the daughter of the cacique Tupi by seven macaws while she bathed in the river. Upon returning to her group she was compelled to save a young man, the son of the cacique Guaraní, from almost drowning by giving him the yerba mate infusion, as explained to her by the macaws. Thus, through this myth, the knowledge of yerba mate was given to the Tupi-guarani people (Nimmo & Nogueira, 2019, p. 351).

By the time the Spanish arrived in the region, the Guaraní and other Indigenous groups in Southern South America had developed efficient processes for harvesting, managing and consuming yerba mate (Nimmo & Nogueira, 2019, p. 351). The processing and consumption of yerba mate, despite five hundred years of ‘history’, remains almost the same as the Guaraní used to do it. What has drastically changed is the method of growth (and the meaning, but more on that later). This is important to remember when we go to the archive. The texts are written by those who had the power to write stories about others. In the stories the colonists wrote, one needs to find the voice of those who were silenced. Originally, the harvest and processing of yerba mate were done right in the heart of the selva. And I would like to tell you how it feels to walk in this selva. I would like to be able to describe to you the sound of the fresh leaves when they are just harvested from the trees. I would like to tell you the stories I heard from the trees. But I can’t. I’ve never been there, and it was only when I moved to the other side of the American Continent that I found myself closer to this place.

Why? Walking away from what I passionately care about has always ironically pulled me closer to it. How? I think distance makes space for imagination and some things require a lot of imagination to be fully appreciated. The following image is my attempt to bring this place closer to us, or us closer to this place.

This is a map of the region where the Guaraní lived at the time of the European conquest (Maeder & Ramón Gutiérrez, 2009). A photograph of the Selva Paranaense (Spouse of Leonard G., 2019)¹ is superimposed to the map.

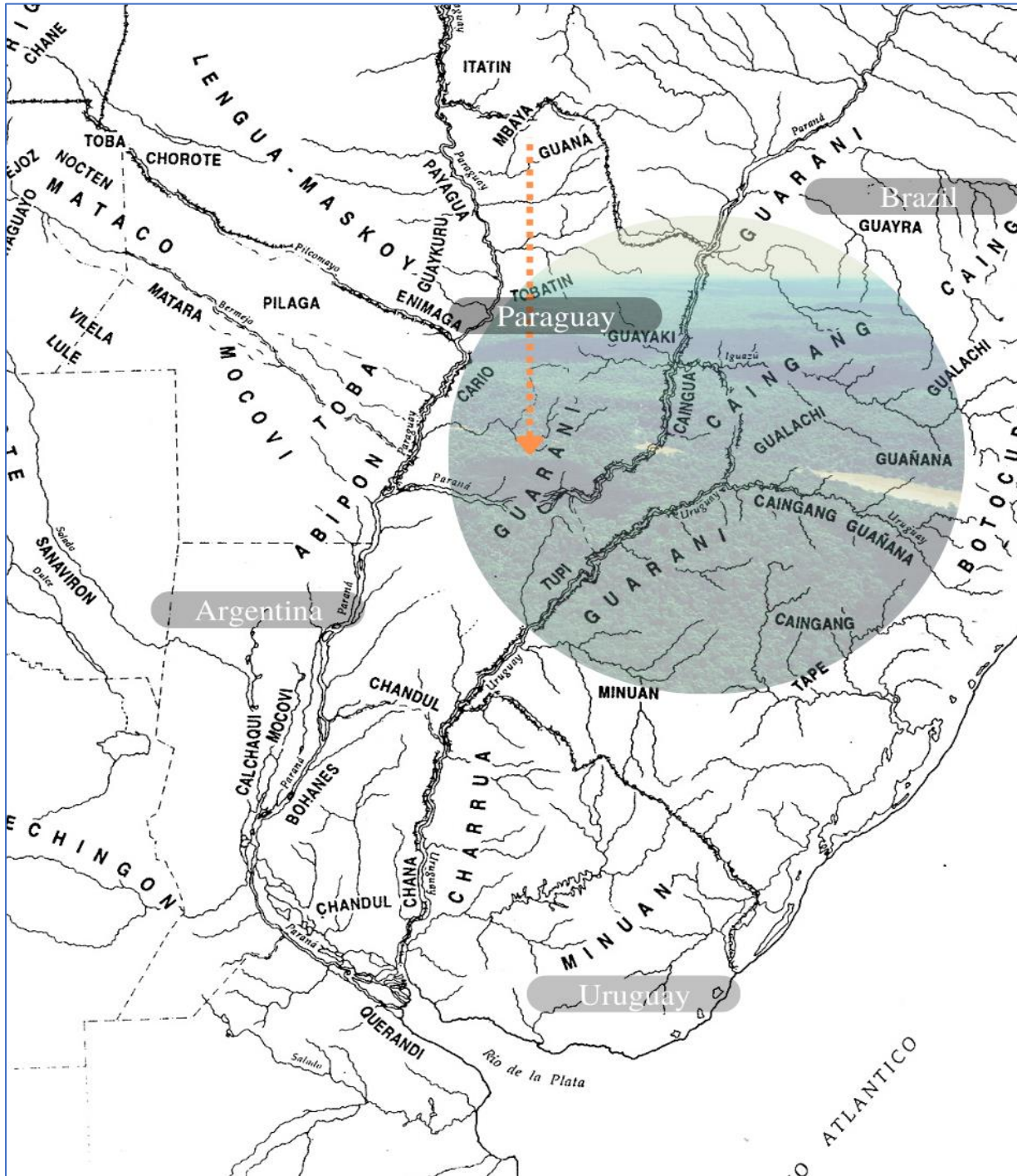


FIGURE 1. SELVA PARANAENSE AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (MAEDER & RAMÓN GUTIÉRREZ, 2009)

¹ I wonder if the spouse didn't have a name

The Guaraní and the Selva alike have both experienced profound transformations since the European arrival. The colonial period meant for the Americas different things at different times. Today, when we talk about yerba mate and observe the issues related to its production and commercialization, the stories we tell to describe the situation seem distant from the story I just told you about the Guaraní, the macaws and the daughter of the Cacique. They seem distant from the sounds of the monkey and the amphibians who have lived in this selva ever since.

To understand what's happening today, it's important to understand what happened to the Guaraní and the Selva when the Europeans arrived and how the political economy of the new global trade set up permanent unequal material exchange flows between the Global North and South. By analyzing the changing meaning of yerba mate in the official narratives all through the centuries, we can grasp how power develops across times.

Teachings from the bitterness: Colonization and the Guaraní

There is something about bitterness that excites me. I don't know how's your relationship with bitter tastes, but to acquire the habit of drinking mate one must find some comfort in bitterness. When I was a kid, I had to drink mate with a lot of sugar because I couldn't stand the taste. And that's how it is for most kids. As one grows older, the real test to "adulthood" is to be able to drink mate with no sugar (since it is said that the "real" mate goes with no sugar). There is also a sense of "pride" that comes with it, as if one is showing respect to "the tradition" by not adding sugar. It is known by the Western knowledge systems that yerba mate offers multiple health benefits, such as 'protective effect on liver cells, stimulation of the central nervous system, anti-inflammatory effect, and beneficial effect on the cardiovascular system' (Lutomski, Goździewska & Florek-Łuszczki, 2020, p. 312). As we'll see, this is knowledge the Guaraní already had. But I prefer to think of the benefits of yerba mate beyond our current scientific understanding of health. Even if it's only in its poetic sense, I think there is merit in understanding the bitterness of yerba mate as a teaching from the plant. By drinking (yerba) mate, one becomes resilient. In the culture I was born in, drinking mate during a difficult time makes the situation less challenging. If I was tired, or if I had to do a lot of work, or if I had something inside me that was hard to share with others, (yerba) mate helped me to do so. But I never considered the bitterness as a message from the plant until I started this project. I then thought that maybe the plant is teaching, through its bitterness, how to regulate our consumption. Or that maybe the plant is teaching us to understand that there

is more to life beyond the bitter. Or that the bitter never comes alone, that we are not alone to face the bitter. Whatever it is for you, for me the bitter was a wake-up call.

When the Spanish began the conquest of Southern South America, the Guaraní people lived in the region that today meets Paraguay, south of Brazil and northeast of Argentina. The Guaraní were semi-sedentary people, moving out every few years due to soil fertility decline, who practiced agriculture, hunting, fishing and gathering, though their diets and lifestyle varied based on the location of settlement (closer to the river or inland). The Guaraní had a gender-organized labour system (Sarrael, 2014, p. 17-18). Hunting was an activity reserved for the men and was upheld highly valuable since it required a great deal of strength and courage (men had to leave the village and adventure into the jungle). Women oversaw the agricultural tasks, domestic chores, pottery and fruit gathering. Contrary to the European mindset of the conquistadors, the Guaraní didn't seek to maximize production; they 'valued leisure and frequently interrupted productive activity with nonproductive activities such as ceremonies, entertainment, social activities, and rest. They didn't try to accumulate goods for later use; they accepted that, just as in nature, there would be periods of plenty followed by periods of scarcity' (Sarrael, 2014, p.18). Even the leader would share instead of accumulating personal wealth. The Guaraní used to live grouped by communal units called *teýys*. Around ten to sixty nuclear families would live in a large communal house of approximately 165 feet by 16 to 20 feet with no inside walls. This arrangement would create a high degree of interdependence among those who constitute the *teýy*. Sometimes, many *teýys* would settle together in villages to protect themselves against enemies (p.19).

But the colonial towns of the further Southern Hemisphere were designed with institutions and rituals that changed the lifestyle of all inhabitants for the years to come, specifically the Guaraní in the region of the Selva Paranaense. The locations where these new cities were settled were chosen because of two reasons: availability of Indigenous labour and soil suitability for farming and pasture. Site selection would come along with the election of the officeholders for the city council, *cabildos*, the formal establishment of the Church, and the distribution of native labour through the *encomienda* system. Following the founding of the city of Asunción, all Guaraní inhabitants from Eastern Paraguay were brought under control through the *encomienda* system (Lopez, p. 494): in exchange for converting the Indigenous people into Christianity, the Crown granted *encomenderos* the right to enforce labour among the native peoples to generate revenues

for the royal tribute (Rock, 1987, p.18). The Guaraní expected that building alliances with the Spaniards, accessing their weapons, and letting Indigenous women marry Spanish men, would benefit them. However, the Spaniards didn't reciprocate. They not only didn't reciprocate but also ignored completely the way the Guaraní organized their lives.

Indigenous people were reduced to pueblos where Europeans could enforce their lifestyle and beliefs. *Reducciones* is the name given to these towns, a word that refers to the verb reduction. I think the word offers us imagery of what this process meant for the Indigenous and the Selva alike. In each *reducción*, the labour employed to pay tribute to the Crown was strictly related to the economic activities of the region. In the region of what today is Paraguay, yerba mate extraction was the main economic driver. Unfortunately, the labour related to yerba mate imposed by the Spaniards was predatory and exterminating, detrimental to the natural environment and the Indigenous people (Raú, 2012, p. 23). The Guaraní men who extracted yerba mate were forced to leave their communities and relocate into the hinterland to collect it, disrupting in this way the Indigenous social systems, the families (Folch, 2009, p.11).

The numerous explorers and navigators from Spain and Portugal that arrived in the southern region of continental America in the early 1500s were driven by reported fables of a hidden Indigenous Kingdom that mirrored the Aztec and Inca empires, abundant in precious metals. In fact, the word Argentina is derived from the Latin word for silver, as it was used by Spanish poets from the Renaissance onward. But instead, the Spanish found yerba mate (and in it, a source of revenue for the Crown). For the Spanish law, yerba mate was a mineral, since it came through the earth without human intervention, to be treated as gold or silver; and the Guaraní were simply 'mineros' (mining workers) to carry on with the extraction under exhausting conditions, to pay the royal tribute (Folch, 2009, p. 11-12). This is what led some people to call it the "green gold".

With all this, one might think, how did the Spanish become so involved with yerba mate? It's likely that the Guaraní introduced this plant to the Spanish and also taught them the way to drink it. Why and how did yerba mate become so popular among the new colonies to the point it transformed into one of the main drivers for economic growth? It's pointless to look in the archive for a description of how this happened (if this was the way it happened). In the voice of the Guaraní myths, we observe different reactions toward the colonizers:

(...) El país originario de los Mbyá es el Yvy Mbyte, el centro de la tierra, situado dentro del actual Departamento de Caaguazú, lugar en donde, a raíz de la unión de un dios y una doncella hermosa, Ñande Jary (nuestra abuela) fue engendrado Pa'i Reté Kuaray, el llamado el mayor de los gemelos, padre de la raza guaraní. Hasta ahora "el que reza buenas plegarias" puede observar las huellas de Ñande Jary en las arenas que circundan Yguá Yvú, el lugar del agua surgente, situado en el Yvy Mbyté, (...) en donde se yergue la palmera eterna Pindoju a cuyo pie tenían su vivienda los progenitores de la raza. (...) los extranjeros son los yvyo amboaé, que vinieron de tierras extrañas. A ellos, y a sus descendientes mestizos, los jurua (bocas peludas, los paraguayos), Dios les dio campos y praderas para criar sus vacas, caballos y demás animales domésticos, a los indios les dejó las selvas con todo lo que contienen, disponiendo que las dos razas vivieran separadas. Los paraguayos y extranjeros que se instalan en las selvas son, por consiguiente, usurpadores.

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(...) The original country of the Mbyá is the Yvy Mbyte, the center of the earth, located within the current Department of Caaguazú, a place where, as a result of the union of a god and a beautiful young woman, Ñande Jary (our grandmother), Pa'i Reté Kuaray was born. He, the so-called eldest of the twins, was the father of the Guarani race. To this day "he who says good prayers" can observe the traces of Ñande Jary in the sands that surround Yguá Yvú, the place of springing water, located in the Yvy Mbyté, (...) where stands the eternal Pindoju palm tree at whose foot the progenitors of the race had their home. (...) the foreigners are the yvyo amboaé, who came from strange lands. To them, and to their mestizo descendants, the jurua (hairy mouths, the Paraguayans), God gave them fields and meadows to raise their cows, horses and other domestic animals, he left the jungles to the Indians with everything they contain, arranging for the two races to live apart. The Paraguayans and foreigners who settle in the jungles are, therefore, usurpers (as quoted by Romini, 2001, p. 3).

Says a few Guaraní legends that at the time of encounter; two Indigenous leads, Guairá and Paraguá, led the natives on different paths. Guairá led those who refused to familiarize themselves with the conquerors, and Paraguá led those who came to an agreement with them (despite the gods imposing the two races to live apart). From the latter union came the Paraguayans (Romini, 2001, p. 3). These legends reflect the different opinions and ideas the Guaraní had about the colonists.

Despite not knowing exactly how it happened, what we know is that the Spanish became obsessed with (yerba) mate. 'In 1596, a member of the town council (cabildo) of Asuncion wrote to Governor Hernandarias de Saavedra that "the vice and bad habit of drinking yerba has spread so much among the Spaniards, their women and children, that unlike the Indians who are content to drink it once a day they drink it continuously and those who do not drink it are very rare"' (López, 1974, p. 498). Religious and non-religious administrative had "their reasons" to limit even prohibit

the consumption of yerba mate. Some of their claims were that: a) Spaniards/Paraguayans were willing to go into debt to be able to buy yerba mate, b) Indigenous people would not work unless allowed to consume yerba, c) Indigenous people would skip going to mass to have yerba, d) there were supposed negative health consequences among drinkers, and e) it was a burden for the Guaraní who concentrated the labour force for yerba mate production (López, 1974, p. 498).

The act of drinking (yerba) mate, in my opinion, represents the relationship between the drinker and the *others*. The drinker's understanding of the *other* will ultimately shape how the relationship between the drinker and the act of drinking will manifest. Yerba mate was consumed and commercialized, and the interplay of these two forces under the dominant values of conquest, expansion, and European religious faiths transformed yerba mate's meaning across time. Despite all efforts to stop yerba mate consumption and business, yerba mate permeated life and politics forever in the history of the region.

Bitter Hybridity: Mate and The Guarani-Jesuit missions

In the new scenario of epidemics, enslavement, and disrupted socio-economic and political structures in the Guaraní society, the Jesuits proposed a different alternative to the Indigenous people. The Guaraní-Jesuit missions were political and physical arrangements that allowed both parties to negotiate power within the colonial system. The Jesuits were called to help spread Catholic beliefs in the New World, but only two fathers were assigned to each mission. Clearly there was something else that would make the Guaraní consider joining the missions (since two men could not simply force a whole town). In fact, it is known that when the missions were insufficient to provide material goods, the Guaraní fled.

Particular characteristics of the Jesuits influenced the reductional process in the Selva Paranaense region. On one side, charitable work was the basis of the Order's organization since the disciples believed that this was a way to get closer to God. On the other side, the Jesuits were allowed by the authorities to develop their own economic activity, give weapons to the mission Guaraní to defend the territory from Spanish and Portuguese attacks, and settle in remote locations away from urban centers and the power figures (Poggi, 2017, p. 236; Sarrael, 2014, p. 24). Even though the Jesuits had to get petitions approved by local and overseas authorities, the extreme distance between the missions' locations and these figures was such that power found different routes.

The missions presented a complex level of hybridity. In the following image one can appreciate how this hybridity translated into the organization of the missions (Maeder & Gutiérrez, 2009). The town was organized around the central square that had the church right there (the light-blue image on the center right of the layout). To the left side of the square, the agricultural garden was generally located and would comprise a mix of European and local varieties (wheat, barley, manioc, beans, sweet potato, peanuts, corn, cotton, tobacco). At the bottom of the image, you can observe the Guaraní houses, and from the center you can see roads toward the *estancias* and the *yerbales*. In the *estancias*, the fathers were raising cows to provide the mission with meat. Cows were brought by Europeans and the Guaraní quickly developed a taste for it; however, they would rather hunt wild cows than raise domestic livestock (Sarrael, 2014). There were two types of *yerbales*, the wild *yerbales* and the plantations.

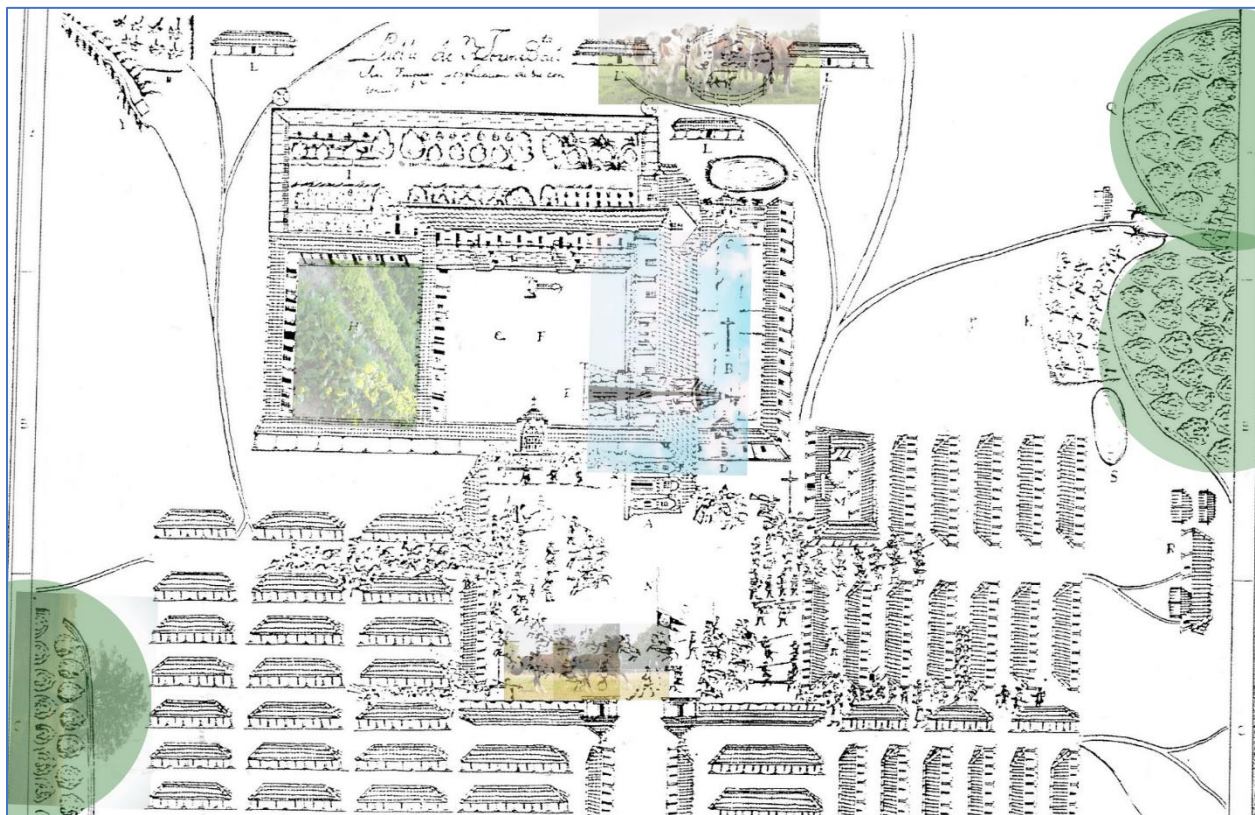


FIGURE 2. LAYOUT OF A GUARANI-JESUIT MISSION (MAEDER & GUTIÉRREZ, 2009)

Layout of a Guarani-Jesuit Mission (Maeder & Gutiérrez, 2009) with superimposed images that show specific characteristics, such as the garden, the *estancias* where the animals were raised for food, the horses in the main square at the center of the town, plus the close access to the selva.

Yerba mate was central to the missions' life, but its meaning differed between the Guaraní and the Jesuits. The Guaraní told early missionaries that they needed yerba because it 'lightened their workload, sustained them when without food, purged their stomach of phlegm, awakened their senses, and dispelled drowsiness' (Sarrael, 2014, p.83). The Jesuits got enough reasons to convince themselves to lobby for yerba mate consumption in the missions (since its consumption got prohibited for some time), and soon also understood that yerba mate could be exported to generate revenue. The Jesuits asked the Crown to exempt the mission Guaraní from the *encomienda* system arguing that it would distract them from their religious instruction, and they got the exemption. Since yerba mate was needed not only for consumption within the mission, but also for exports, some Guaraní still needed to leave the missions for a few months a year to harvest yerba mate from the selva. A combination of a desire for more control over the religious instruction of the Guaraní and a somewhat legit concern for the hardship and danger of yerba mate extraction led to the development of yerba mate plantations (Raú, 2011; Folch, 2009).

The mission's yerba mate plantations were only possible because of this hybridity. Active involvement from each party was required in order to combine the European understanding of the plantation technique with the knowledge of the ecosystem only the Guaraní had. After 50 years of trial and error to develop the practice, the cultivation of the yerba mate tree was born (Nimmo & Nogueira, 2019).

The Jesuits' expulsion represents a change in the course of yerba mate. A total of 30 Guaraní-Jesuits missions were established from 1609 to 1767 in the region in and around the colonial border between Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. In 1767, King Carlos III expelled the Jesuits from the region and the reasons for their expulsion are beyond the scope of this paper. Yerba mate was highly traded between the Governorship of Paraguay and Buenos Aires. By the end of the 17th century, the bulk of yerba mate for exports in Paraguay was produced in the yerba mate plantations of the missions. An extensive series of taxes were added to the commercialization of yerba mate; however, the Jesuits got royal exemptions since they argued that yerba mate was not grown for profit, only to generate enough to 'pay the king's tribute and buy goods' that couldn't be produced in the missions (Folch, 2009, p. 507). That motivated an internal competition between the Jesuits and the other yerba mate traders who were in the same jurisdiction. From this conflict, a limit of 12,000 arrobas was imposed on the missions as the maximum amount of yerba mate they could

export (Folch, 2009, p. 508). Nevertheless, the Jesuits became the most important producers and exporters of yerba mate (Folch, 2009, p. 509). With the crucial contribution from the Jesuits, by the end of the 18th century, Paraguay dominated the yerba mate market.

With the expulsions of the Jesuits come the marginalization of the Guaraní from the (yerba) mate industry. It's not that the Guaraní were ever given a share, but the yerba mate plantations presented a different alternative. In this specific context, the plantation of yerba mate allowed the mission Guaraní to escape much of the harmful and deadly phenomenon that colonization meant for them and their transformed relationship with yerba mate. The Jesuits understood that, in order to make easier the process of evangelization, yerba mate and communal living needed to be at the core of the missions. In the following section I briefly narrate the inevitable cascade of events that followed the Jesuits' expulsion period.

Discussions: How (yerba) mate became Argentinian?

In the next hundreds of years, multiple contradictions and tensions between different jurisdictions were to explode. We observe the struggles of independence and the emergence of new nations. As a result of these nation building processes, the production of mate became primarily associated with Argentina. But how did it shift away from Paraguay?

During the colonial period, we saw an appropriation of yerba mate by the colonists. I will deliberately use the word misappropriation instead since, in that time, more than a lack of acknowledgement, the most profound problem was the use of yerba mate as a means for economic growth. This not only changed the meaning of (yerba) mate, but it also changed the physical world where yerba mate was grown.

Change was a complex process that involved collusion and resistance on the part of the Guaraní. The Guaraní were dispossessed from their lands initially when the colonists arrived in the region and settled the new colonies. Some of the Indigenous people were able to remain in their lands through the Jesuits' missions, as we saw. But when the Jesuits got expelled, the Guaraní were forced to disperse again and yerba mate plantations were abandoned. The Guaraní now were sent back to extract yerba mate from the wild *yerbales*.

Within the colonial structure, contradictions and tensions between the different jurisdictions under the *Río de la Plata* viceroyalty led to the process of Independence and the emergence of new nations. It's beyond the scope of this essay how those contradictions and tensions played out (for more see Rock, 1987). The so-called countries of Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina embarked on different journeys to consolidate their economies and identities.

Since a large number of the Guaraní were situated in the current Paraguay, it's important to mention how the process of nation-building for Paraguay ended up directly affecting the Guaraní.

Following independence, early Paraguay received a particular dictator, José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, who assumed the power and exercised an absolute control over wealth and territories to prevent the growth of private capital and isolate the country from most of commercial relations with the exterior (Chiavenato, 2008, p. 17-20). This dictatorship is a complex period, which cannot be included in this paper. However, from this period, what I want to mention is that, even though the Guaraní got dispossessed from their lands, their life condition improved with the creations of nationalized parcels of land, called *estancias de la patria*, to provide food for the people (especially the poor).

The following dictator, Carlos Antonio López, one of the remaining rich people secluded in the interior of the country, changed the rules of the game. During the following decades, the Guaraní were taught a new type of relationship with the land: the salary (Folch, 2009, p. 16). The Guaraní transitioned to a period of dispossession and displacement where the new relationship with the land they used to live in was through paid labour. Despite all, the Guaraní were not generally motivated to get involved in the labour that the advance of capitalism was calling for (Raú, 2011).

From its independence, Paraguay took a path that conflicted with the projects that the neighboring nations of Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina had for the region. As a result of this conflict, the three nations united against Paraguay in a war that lasted from 1865 to 1870, the Paraguay war or Triple Alliance war (if interested see Chiavenato, 2008). The Paraguay war deserves a whole project on its own, and I will likely embark on that project in the near future. But I need to mention it in this story because it does mark the end of an era.

The Paraguay war symbolically represents the intersection where and when the history of (yerba) mate changes its course for ever. When the war ended, the three united countries were left with huge external debts. On the other side, Paraguay came out of the war with 99,5% of its male population dead. Most of these soldiers were Guaraní men, and some of them were women and kids enlisted when the number of existing soldiers wasn't enough (Chiavenato, 2008).

During this war, the territory currently known as Misiones became strategic for the advance of Brazilian and Uruguayan troupes into Paraguayan territory without being noticed. The wealth of the land became evident for the local governments. With a Paraguay deeply wounded by the war and out of the yerba mate business, the Argentinian government found a way to secure the exploitation of that territory to solidify its position as an export country, while also reconstructing the new identity that was going to represent the emerging nation. In this way, the Province of Misiones was opened to white immigrants and European investors to exclusively plant and grow yerba mate in exchange for land ownership.

This is how (yerba) mate became Argentine in the official narratives of (yerba) mate.

Bittersweet conclusions

Nothing is just sweet, or just bitter. Even if something predominates, our experience is always complex and interconnected. Drinking (yerba) mate was for me always sweet; it meant friends, laughs, company, strength. It meant company when I was alone. But writing this story required me to face the bitter moments of the yerba mate history, the bitter moments intentionally left out from the official narratives. The Guaraní learned to consume yerba mate in the form of rituals. Little did they know that by passing the rituals of yerba mate to the Europeans, everything would change.

The meaning of (yerba) mate changed throughout the centuries. Congruent with Hall's ideas on Fanon's essay on the veil (Nash et al., 1996), we saw how (yerba) mate became a symbol of/for power. Given the power relations developed from colonization and the advancement of the capitalist model across the globe, the changes in the meaning of (yerba) mate reflect how that power was negotiated in the changing contexts.

Understanding Trouillot's (2015) invitation to critically appraise historicity, I conclude that the Indigenous origins of the drink are not present in the current official narratives of (yerba) mate (the stories that tell us who drinks it, how and why) because these narratives derive from a process of nation formation that deliberately looked to leave behind the Indigenous presence in the story of our origins.

By commodifying (yerba) mate, the plant, the culture and its ritual have been reduced to an *object of consumption*. Colonization in South America, due to its violent and exploitative nature, left behind a harmful cycle of unequal global exchange with the so-called *developed* nations for economic development, that never gets anywhere and imposes an ever-increasing ecological burden (Alondo-Fernández & Regueiro-Ferreira, 2022).

But this story does not need to end here.

What's next?

I come from a country where the word 'crisis' must be one of the first words one hears. Everything has to do with the crisis. I found myself many times complaining and blaming the crisis for everything and anything. However, I don't think I understood then what I meant by that. Sometimes, in the rush of life, we tend to believe that things have always been the same. I remember complaining about corruption and bureaucracy and having people responding to me that "this was the way it had always been". I heard it so much, that it became one of the reasons why I left Argentina. I couldn't stand that answer anymore. I didn't know if that was true or not, but I refused to accept that this was the way things were. The simple desire of not wanting to accept something that causes pain and suffering to others as the only way possible, led me to a search for new truths.

Ironically, that search took me back to where I left. I went all the way in the opposite direction, to come back to the same place (yes, the Earth is round). We are embedded not only in the physical world but also in the worlds we create. These two types of worlds feed and shape each other, and in doing so, our bodies constantly transform. In my opinion, it's because we transform with these worlds, that we tend to believe things have always been the same. The reason why it's important to tell stories is to keep the memory of the world we were once part of. This memory doesn't take

us to that world but shows us who we were when the world was a different place. If we remember how we change, then stories might change the worlds we create.

The story I just told you, was the story I didn't know when my friend asked me about the origin of (yerba) mate. I've demonstrated throughout this essay why I did not know. But this is not a story that can be written as the result of doing some readings. This story required self-teaching. bell hooks explains in the introduction of *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) that education is meant to sets us free and that is by becoming critical thinkers. She criticizes how mainstream education teaches obedience to the authority. In my life, the way I've come to challenge the authority has been by learning where, in my experience, the authority has silenced my questions. When I realized that I had never asked myself the question my friend asked me, I knew I had found my opportunity to transform.

By creating a new story, I've become a different person.

By becoming a different person, I've contributed to change the world considering that, for me, the world is no longer what it used to be before writing the story.

Now I invite you to listen to the next part of this story through another platform.

I've continued the project on ArcGIS StoryMap. Over there, I've created a collection of stories that, through an examination of the current official narratives of (yerba) mate, illustrates the correlation between the erased Indigenous origins of the drink and the current socio-environmental consequences associated with the story of (yerba) mate as Argentine. As well, I connect these Indigenous origins to the current scenario of (yerba) mate in North America. This collection is an invitation to explore (and create) the futures of (yerba) mate.

To create a different future, is to create different stories. The collection finishes with a poetic piece and a sonic experience to exemplify the possibilities of change that art-based methodologies and pedagogies offer in a context of ecological crisis and social injustices.

Here is the link for access:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/adcf49df92ab4e7080339367222c6b1f>

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