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Articles

Proximal transnationalism and identities within the border between Brazil and Paraguay

Transnacionalismo próximo e identidades en la frontera entre Brasil y Paraguay

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Abstract

The central objective of this article is to analyze transnational practices within border regions. The theoretical analysis focuses on the participation of rural workers, including members of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), in transnational activities on the border between Brazil and Paraguay. Based on the cross-border experience of rural workers' relations, part of a longitudinal study starting in 2012, with annual/bi-annual visits culminating in the final fieldwork in 2024, this article argues that geographical proximity and the search for a piece of land for subsistence have an essential role in cross-border transnationalism between Brazil and Paraguay. Based on own studies, defining transnationalism within border regions as *proximal transnationalism* is proposed. This case study also demonstrates how the participation of this group in transnationalism, encompassing agrarian issues in both countries, contributes to the formation of *Brasiguaio* identity (Brazilian + Paraguayan).

Keywords: borders, migration, transnationalism, Brazil, Paraguay.

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Resumen

El objetivo central de este artículo es analizar practicas transnacionales en regiones trasfronterizas. El análisis teórico se enfoca en la participación de trabajadores rurales, incluidos miembros del Movimiento de los trabajadores rurales sin tierra (MST), en actividades transnacionales en la frontera entre Brasil y Paraguay. Basado en las experiencias transfronterizas de las relaciones de trabajadores rurales, parte de un estudio longitudinal iniciado en 2012 con visitas anuales/bianuales que culminaron con el trabajo de campo en 2024, este artículo argumenta que la proximidad geográfica y la búsqueda por un pedazo de tierra para la subsistencia tienen un rol esencial en el transnacionalismo fronterizo entre Brasil y Paraguay. Con base en estudios propios, se propone definir transnacionalismo abarcando zonas fronterizas como *transnacionalismo próximo*. Este caso de estudio también demuestra cómo la participación de

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este grupo en transnacionalismo, que abarca cuestiones agrarias en ambos países, contribuye para la formación de la identidad *brasiguaya* (brasileña + paraguaya).

Palabras clave: frontera, migración, transnacionalismo, Brasil, Paraguay.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, closing their borders to limit the spread of the virus was one of the first steps many countries took. The pandemic affected the movement of rural workers; it impacted global agriculture, agricultural production and the management of livestock handling systems worldwide (Arumugam et al., 2021). For example, on the border between the towns of Pedro Juan Caballero (Paraguay) and Ponta Porã (Brazil), the Paraguayan border control police physically dug a ditch to prevent people from crossing between the two cities/countries (Andrada & Godoy, 2020).

This is an example of a region that is not joined by the national border but divided by it, a case of transnationalism within a short distance, creating new ways of life that have invited to rethink new territories that are not within a national geography, a "transnational city" configuring a "third space" (Besserer & Nieto, 2015, p. 24). Contrary to the arguments at the start of the 21st century, when it was suggested that borders were disappearing, with an "urgent need to develop strategies at the national and international level" (Pang & Guindon, 2004, p. 15), borders have not disappeared.

Nevertheless, borders have been increasingly recognized as essential devices in determining the movement of people and goods to serve the countries' interests (Gerrard & Sriprakash, 2018; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers and researchers were undoubtedly challenged to think more deeply about the functions of borders, human mobility, agricultural production and food security, to mention a few.

The objective of this article is to explore the cross-border, migration and transnational experiences spanning the Brazil-Paraguay shared border. The overarching aim of this paper is to contribute to the field of border studies and cognate disciplines by presenting this case study, which may have similarities with other groups within other border regions. This paper is focused on the experiences of two landless groups of Brazilian origin that emigrated to Paraguay, mainly in the second half of the 20th century, then returned to Brazil in an organized manner, in 1985 and 2009, pursuing the ownership of a piece of land for subsistence.

Both landless groups returned to Brazil self-defining as *Brasiguaios*, with the support of groups within the catholic church and the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST, acronym from Portuguese: Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra) in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul (MS). The term Brasiguaios (*Brasi*leiro + Para*guaio*), also spelt in Spanish as *Brasiguayos*, is generally used to refer to rural workers who hold socio-cultural ties with Brazil and Paraguay. The transnational activities and movement of people across the border produce "very contradictory processes: the identity differences and the construction of elements of shared characteristics" (Pereira Carneiro, 2019, p. 40).

The first part of this article encompasses the theoretical framework of transnationalism, which has grounded this study. Then, the second part focuses on transnationalism in

border regions. Next, it moves on to the case study at hand and the participants. Once the dynamics of this border region have been presented and analyzed, the article rounds off with concluding remarks and an invitation for further research on proximal transnationalism across other border regions.

The study of the dynamics of the Brazil-Paraguay border is not new; Cardin and Fiorotti Lima (2018) shared an analysis of the complex commercial activities of *sacoleiros*, Brazilian individuals engaged in purchasing a large number of items in Paraguay to re-sell in Brazil. They focused their study on the urban boundaries between Foz de Iguaçú (Brazil)-Ciudad del Este (Paraguay) and Guaíra (Brazil)-Salta del Guairá (Paraguay) in the southern Brazilian border region with Paraguay.

Nevertheless, this article focuses on transnational rural activities spanning the boundaries between the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in the central-western part of Brazil and the Department (equivalent to state) of Amambay of Paraguay. In common, both articles emphasize factors such as understanding the local idiosyncrasies and circulation of people within the border region to understand the dynamics of everyday life within the Brazilian and Paraguayan shared border region.

The central argument of this paper is that people living within border regions, not limited to the distinct features of the Brazil-Paraguay border, engage in short-distance forms of transnationalism, which here is called *proximal transnationalism*. Transnationalism within border regions has existed in the past; however, *proximal transnationalism* is not to be viewed as a novelty, but as a lens that contributes to the adding to work in the field of transnationalism and related disciplines, such as borderland, border studies and associated disciplines. The underlying objective is to highlight the different transnational dynamics spanning borders that are still worthy of attention. This is also an invitation for researchers to investigate further into how living in proximity to the country of origin plays a role in transnationalism.

The foundation of the field of transnationalism

For a long time, different groups of workers, including rural dwellers, have crossed borders and engaged in transnational practices worldwide, not just between Brazil and Paraguay. The field of transnationalism was grounded on the study of long-distance forms of transnationalism, with limited attention paid to the diverse forms of transnationalism encompassing border regions.This may be due, in part, because Glick Schiller and her colleagues' pioneering work grounded their work on studies about the transnational engagement of immigrants from the Philippines, St. Vincent, Grenada and Haiti in the United States (Glick Schiller et al., 1992).

Oscar Martinez (1994) was the first researcher to incorporate transnationalism into his study of life and society in the United States-Mexico borderlands as early as the 1990s, including the movement of rural workers who crossed the border to fill labor shortages in rural and urban settings in the United States. After the turn of the century, it has been observed in Mexico that, even though more than half of the population in predominantly rural municipalities has a low reliance on cross-border migration, emigration intensity has increased by one-third in this type of municipality (Bada & Fox, 2021).

The case of Tijuana-San Diego is an example of large transnational urban formations, where people and goods cross the border—legally or illegally—daily (Besserer & Nieto, 2015). As pointed out by Carneiro (2016), border regions present an ambiguous context that may contribute to conflict as well as integration by allowing cultural exchange and sociocultural experiences, involving transnational networks in bordering towns, not just serving as a point of transit. However, research on transnationalism within border regions is still limited.

Concerning the border between Brazil and Paraguay, as early as the 1870s, shortly after the end of the Triple Alliance War (1864-1870), several Paraguayans emigrated to Brazilian states bordering Paraguay in the pursuit of work in agriculture (Wilcox, 1993). However, in the second half of the 20th century, the Paraguayan government invested heavily in developing agricultural production along its border with Brazil.

Starting in the 1960s, the Paraguayan government attracted poor peasants of Brazilian origin to clear land and engage in agricultural practices in Paraguay's eastern border region, which borders today's Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul[1] (Albuquerque, 2009). The Paraguayan government attracted rural workers who had failed in previous agrarian reform programs implemented by the Brazilian government in the 1950s, as well as those workers who were considered no longer needed in Brazil due to the implementation of mechanized modes of production. By the end of the 1970s, both sides of the Brazilian-Paraguayan shared border had been developed through the implementation of agricultural production and related activities. As a result, this region is deeply marked by the circulation of people engaged in agricultural production.

Proximal transnationalism: everyday life across the border

Since 2011, when the author initially started researching different groups within the Brazil- Paraguay border region, he has used the term *proximal transnationalism*. The term refers to the everyday practices forged and sustained by individuals, both immigrant and non-immigrant groups, living within border regions, wherein they create and maintain socio-cultural ties benefiting from the constitutive role of borders and living in proximity to another country, which serve to strengthen short-distance forms of transnationalism.

Proximal transnationalism is neither predicated upon migration as a compulsory component, found mainly in the transnationalism literature, nor limited to bordering towns but deeply rooted in processes involving individuals and institutions spanning borders. Often, the national borders serve as both intraurban and international borders at the same time (Besserer & Nieto, 2015, p. 26). The concept of transnational places at its core the migration processes followed by the immigrants' engagements in practices involving their country of origin (Basch et al., 1994); however, transnational activities are placed at the core of proximal transnationalism. Placing transnational practices and

[1] In 1977, the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso was divided into two states, the northern region remained called Mato Grosso and the southern part became Mato Grosso do Sul.

processes at the center of proximal transnationalism does not diminish the significance of migration in transnationalism. On the contrary, human migration has long produced meaningful complex cross-border processes.

The term proximal transnationalism is based on research conducted in the Brazil-Paraguay shared border setting; it is grounded on cross-border activities and migration experiences in pursuit of land for agricultural production at its core. Proximal transnationalism emphasizes how individuals living within a borderland have their knowledge, way of life and identities affected by their proximity to another country. Living in a place adjacent to another country allows immigrants and non-immigrants to form new, maintain or participate in a variety of kinship, economic, political and cultural ties.

Proximal transnationalism is intrinsically related to the construction of cross-border (*transfronterizo*) spaces and identities. For instance, in the case of the Chile, Peru and Bolivia border region, the "apparition of autonomous and indigenous territories" was seen as a paradoxical manifestation of State consolidation (Rouvière, 2014). The territorial social reconfiguration in this case has resulted from the interaction of norms created and modified through the interactions of the different State and non-state actors, including the Aymara people and their traditions. In this context, the everyday life of the Aymara people has contributed, for instance, to facilitate the cross-border movement of people, transit of goods and border security. It is seen that "local strategic uses of border and ethnicity can have deeper transformative effects on the management of cross-border space" (Rouvière, 2014, p. 17).

In Europe, particularly within the European Union region, activities that transcend the barriers to trade and people-to-people collaboration are emerging at external borders. The development of cross-border cooperation spanning countries within and outside the European Union is still challenging. In the case of the Estonian-Russian and Romanian-Moldovan borderlands, Boman and Berg noted that the shared historical-cultural identity that could inspire cross-border cooperation has rather served as an obstacle led by the "clear mental border between us and the other", even in the northern part of the Estonian-Russian border region, which is populated largely by Russian speakers (Boman & Berg, 2007, p. 206).

On the other hand, despite proclamations of having dissimilar ethnic features, Moldovans perceive Romanians in very similar terms, even more so than people on the Romanian side. While on the Moldavian side, "economic benefits appear to have become somewhat prioritized over cultural cooperation", Romanians seemingly perceive cross-border cooperation as an institutional identity led by political actors and media in the attempt to build up an image of the border region (Boman & Berg, 2007, p. 207).

The engagement in transnational practices—not just in agricultural activities—across the border may take form in an institutionalized way; they may also escape government control. For example, referring again to the case of the United States-Mexico border, reference can be made to the well-known Bracero program of the U.S.-Mexican governments until the 1960s. The Bracero programs were created to employ a large number of low-skilled temporary Mexican agricultural workers to fill seasonal jobs on farms in the United States, which "continued, often illegally, for decades after the program was ended" (Newland & Riester, 2022, p. 182).

In the Brazil-Paraguay case, although the Paraguayan government started attracting Brazilian rural workers to Paraguay in the middle of the 19th century, there were no policies or formal agreements in place to have Brazilians as temporary workers or immigrants in Paraguay (Estrada, 2017b).

While conducting fieldwork in Brazil and Paraguay over the years, three distinct groups emerged. First, *transnationals,* the group of non-migrants living within the border region of their country of origin who engage in cross-border practices, directly or indirectly. Second, *transnational migrants,* this group refers to immigrants from the neighboring country who could easily visit their country of origin. Third, *transnational returnees*, refers to those individuals who emigrated and then returned to their country of origin while maintaining ties to their previous place of settlement.

Seeding transnationalism through agricultural practices

In Brazil, president Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945) implemented, as part of his dictatorial presidency, the program *Marcha ao Oeste* (March to the west), which his successors followed, to develop the central-western region and the state of Mato Grosso (do Sul) on the border with Paraguay through agricultural production. Despite coming to power after leading a revolt, Vargas had ambitious plans to bring social and economic changes to modernize Brazil. Later, Vargas would return to the presidency democratically; he won the 1950 Brazilian presidential election.

Thus, Vargas' development plans continued during his second mandate (1951-1954). Vargas' program was effective in attracting internal migrants to the region. Nonetheless, some initiatives were not implemented, and as mechanized modes of production became more prevalent, many peasants were forced to consider relocating to other areas.

While *Marcha ao Oeste* started to fail in Brazil, General Alfred Stroessner came to power in Paraguay (1954 -1989). Stroessner created a series of land policies known as *Marcha al Leste* (March to the east) to develop the country's border region with Brazil through agricultural production. The *Marcha al Leste* was a well-thought strategy to benefit from the momentum created by unsuccessful Brazilian agrarian reform projects.

In the 1960s, Stroessner created his central land policies to attract agricultural workers from Brazil (Estrada, 2017a). In 1963, the Paraguayan movement passed law 852/63, establishing the Instituto de Bienestar Rural (Institute of Rural Welfare) to promote colonization, land reform and land oversight (*Ley 852/63. Que crea el Instituto de Bienestar Rural*, 1963); it also created the *Estatuto Agrario* (Agrarian Statute) to ensure the use of land fulfills its social function (*Ley 854/63. Que establece el Estatuto Agrario*, 1963).

The Agrarian Statute established that rural properties had to accomplish their social function, which consisted of demonstrating the rational use of the land for agricultural production and related activities (*Ley 852/63. Que crea el Instituto de Bienestar Rural*, 1963; *Ley 854/63. Que establece el Estatuto Agrario*, 1963). However, the most significant measure created to attract Brazilians to Paraguay occurred in 1967, when the Paraguayan government amended its constitution and abolished the law

prohibiting foreign nationals from purchasing land in the country (Estrada, 2015). As a result, several Brazilians were attracted to emigrating to the Paraguayan border region with Brazil.

Table 1. Estimate of the total of Brazilian migrants in Paraguay

Year	1943	1956	1962	1969	1972	1979	1982
Total	513	636	2 250	11 000	31 869	150 000	250 000
Year	1985	1986	2000	2001	2002	2012	2018
Total	500 000	350 000	454 501	442 104	459 147	500 000	600 000

Source: author's elaboration using data from Laino (1979), Wagner (1990), "La invasión brasileña" (2003), Albuquerque (2010), Marques (2009), Lissardy (2012), Tiburcio (2011), Simon (2013), Schneider Fiorentin (2013) and Da Silva and Luís (2018)

Although the numbers in Table 1 may be an undercounted estimate, they give an overview of the migration process of Brazilians to Paraguay in the last decades. By the 1980s, Brazilians became a major ethnic group acquiring political and economic influence in the agricultural sectors in Paraguay, especially within the border region with Brazil. As the number of Brazilian immigrants and their impact on agricultural production in Paraguay grew over time, so did tensions with Paraguayan landless groups, who claimed a *de facto* right to their piece of land under the Paraguayan constitution.

In the 1980s, the tension reached its peak. In 1985, as a result of tensions between Paraguayan landless groups and Brazilian immigrants in Paraguay and the end of the dictatorship in Brazil, about 1 000 families of Brazilian origin, self-defining as Brasiguaios, returned from Paraguay to Brazil in the pursuit of a piece of land ("Governo gasta", 1985).

Individuals of Brazilian origin were estimated to make up approximately 95% of the population in some towns on the eastern side of Paraguay; for instance, in the departments of Itapúa, Alto Paraná, Canindeyú and Caaguazú (FIAN & La Vía Campesina, 2007). The remaining 5% may still include Paraguayan-born individuals of Brazilian origin, the second generation. The current population of Paraguay is approximately 6.4 million people; Brazilian immigrants still make up about 10% of the country's population (Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Paraguay, n. d.).

Participants in this research: the Brasiguaios

Since the 1980s, it has been nearly impossible to discuss agrarian policies, agricultural production and rural practices in Paraguay without mentioning the social and economic influence of Brasiguaios. While it is unclear when the term Brasiguaio was first used, participants in this study reported using the term Brasiguaio in Paraguay as early as the 1970s. However, the term Brasiguaio first appeared in print in *Veja* magazine in 1981.

Veja published an article titled "A trilingual nation: Brasiguaios, a land created by Brazilians who went to live on Paraguayan soil" (p. 48). This article described the Paraguayan border region as "the country of Brasiguaios", founded by Brazilian immigrants engaged in agricultural production in Paraguay ("Uma nação trilíngue:", 1981). The transnational interrogation, spanning two or more countries, has contributed to the formation of social, political and economic interactions and cross-border identities (Mansvelt Beck & Hortelano Mínguez, 2016).

The term *Brasiguaio* has been used by different groups of people holding ties with Brazil and Paraguay, such as Brazilians who emigrated to Paraguay and then returned to Brazil (Sprandel, 1992); Brazilians engaged in agricultural work in Paraguay (Albuquerque, 2005); and wealthy Brazilian farmers in Paraguay, mostly engaged in the production of transgenic soybean (Fogel, 2008; Fogel & Riquelme, 2005). Thus, it is not possible to speak of a single, unique Brasiguaio identity (Estrada, 2017a).

Brasiguaios 1985: the first return

On July 14, 1985, the first group of Brazilian returnees returned from Paraguay to Brazil, self-identifying as Brasiguaios to distinguish themselves from the rest of the Brazilians. They returned from Paraguay and camped out at dawn in the Brazilian border town of Mundo Novo, also in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, demanding a piece of land from the Brazilian federal government. The return was organized with the support of the Comissão da Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission), a group of the Catholic Church founded in 1975 that supports land workers. They were also assisted by the Serviço Pastoral do Migrante (Pastoral Care of Migrants) in Brazil and Paraguay (Albuquerque, 2010).

As presented by Alves, "Brasiguaios have already overcome, let's say, the vocational stage... Brasiguaio is completely integrated into [agricultural] production" (Alves, 1990, p. 19) said Brazilian Federal Deputy Sérgio Cruz, who assisted in settling the first group of Brasiguaios in 1985. Despite being a disadvantaged group of people, their peasant condition was a meaningful social capital that helped the Brazilian National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform, a government agency established in 1970 to promote agrarian reform in the country. According to De Aquino (2016), Brazilian National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform has revealed initiatives to settle a part of this group of people in recovered pieces of land.

The return of 2009: acampamento dos Brasiguaios

Following the election of Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo in 2008, who promised agrarian reform and land ownership, tensions in the country rose between Paraguayan landless groups and Brazilian rural workers. Tensions over land ownership in Paraguay led to conflicts and the death of members in both groups (Albuquerque, 2010).

The pursuit of a piece of land for subsistence has led to a never-ending struggle over land ownership in both countries. In Paraguay, it is deeply marked by the ownership of land by Brazilians and their descendants. "On the Paraguayan side,

socio-economic differentiation is seen between poor Paraguayan peasants and prosperous Brazilian businessmen, which coincides with ethnocultural differentiation" (Fogel, 2008, p. 277). This is because during Stroessner's government, the Paraguayan government invested heavily in attracting agricultural workers of European origin to settle in Paraguay (Estrada, 2017b).

As the tension and armed conflicts escalated in Paraguay, members of the Brazilian Rural Worker's Landless Movement in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul (MST-MS) assisted Brazilian rural workers in Paraguay. Some MST-MS members travelled to Paraguay to assist rural workers and their families in need of support to return to Brazil.

Many landless families returned to Brazil and joined the MST's Antônio Irmão landless camp in the town of Itaquiraí, MS. Due to a large number of self-defining Brasiguaios families in this landless camp, the landless camp quickly became known in the region as the Acampamento dos Brasiguaios (Brasiguaios landless camp). At the height of the conflict in Paraguay in 2009, the population of this landless camp numbered 612 families.[2]

Both cases have received international attention. The latter case study was featured in my award-winning ethnographic film, produced as part of a post-doc activity in the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick, the film is entitled: "Brasiguaios: transnational lives and identities".[3]

The study setting: place and people

The data in this article was gathered as part of a multi-site ethnographic study conducted between 2013 and 2024 in Brazil and Paraguay. It includes fieldwork periods in the town of Novo Horizonte do Sul, MS, began in 2018, when they celebrated the 33rd anniversary of their return from Paraguay on June 14, 1985. Additional data was collected in 2018 and 2022 into the Brasiguaios landless camp and the town of Novo Horizonte do Sul (MS) (Table 2).

According to the last Census, from 2022, the towns of Itaquiraí and Novo Horizonte do Sul had an estimated population of 19 996 and 4 811, respectively (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatistica, n. d.-a, n. d.-b). While the dynamics in the former seemed unaltered, the population in the landless camp had been reduced to only a few families, with some re-emigrating to other parts of Brazil and others returning to Paraguay.

[2] Data provided by the Antônio Irmão landless camp leaders in 2013.

[3] The film and information about the Brasiguaios can be found at: https://www.go.warwick.ac.uk/brasiguaios. The film was originally produced in 2017, and then a small excerpt was added in 2019. It was part of the official selection of 17 festivals, including the Global Migration Film Festival, organized by the International Organization of Migration (IOM). As part of this festival, among other countries, the film was exhibited in Brazil, Chile, Egypt and Iraq.

Table 2. Total number of interviewed participants divided by gender and research site

	Male	Female
Landless camp Antônio Irmão	15	14
Novo Horizonte do Sul	12	13

Source: author´s elaboration

In the land camp, the average age of the research participants was 42 (male 41 and female 43), and in Novo Horizonte do Sul, it was 45.5 (male 49 and female 42). Although nearly half of the participants in the landless camp claimed to speak Spanish (14 out of 29), they all chose to be interviewed in Portuguese, and only four participants switched languages during the interview or used words and expressions in Spanish (just one participant demonstrated his ability to speaker Guarani language during the interview). While some participants in Novo Horizonte do Sul claimed not to speak Spanish because they only spoke Portuguese while living in Paraguay, others claimed to have limited Spanish-speaking abilities; thus, all interviews were conducted in Portuguese.

The proximal circulation of people within the border

This border region comprises closely knitted cross-border activities living dual lives, speaking two or more languages, and learning the socio-political and historical dynamics through regular engagement spanning the border. Especially in the past, the movement of people and goods between Brazil and Paraguay happened almost as if the territorial boundaries did not exist (Cardin & Fiorotti Lima, 2018).

Despite the putative cross-border restrictions enforced during the first government of Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945), the free circulation of people within this border region continued. With the fast advance of the meaning of communication and transportation, the circulation of people and goods between Brazil and Paraguay gained force. The cross-border cooperation between Brazilian and Paraguayan bordering towns gained momentum at the end of the 20th century, after the creation of Mercosur.

The new institutionalized dynamics allowed for the creation and improvement of infrastructure, education and economic cross-border initiatives. This was particularly noticeable between 2003-2006, during Lula's first term as president (Pereira Carneiro, 2019).

The rapid development of transportation and communication advances was essential in strengthening transnationalism (Estrada, 2017a; Portes, 1999; Pries, 1999); occasional engagement in cross-border processes should not be considered transnationalism (Vertovec, 1999). In the case of the Brazil-Paraguay border region, allowed by living in proximity to Brazil and the ability to cross the border, transnationalism is also deeply marked by the presence of students circulating within the border region.

As Brazilian public schools cater to students living in Brazil, living in proximity to their school, one may easily make an incorrect assumption: the students reside in Brazil; they were/are just circulating across the border; as explained later, this may be inaccurate though. In many Brazilian schools, it is known that some students reside in

Paraguay with their families but receive education in Brazil; their parents use a resident's proof of address in Brazil to be registered in a Brazilian school.

It was found that transnational ways of life are not by any means formed only by long-distance transnationalism. For instance, they can be formed in streets, neighborhoods, indigenous communities as well as in transnational networks of care and construction reformulating social arrangements (Besserer & Nieto, 2015). In the town of Ponta Porã, in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul, the demographics of the Brazilian public school Polo Municipal Ramiro Noronha, famous in the region as the "school of Paraguayan students with Brazilian documentation", provides an overview of the education transnationally marked within this border.

This is characterized by the visible flow of students transiting between Brazil and Paraguay wearing the school's uniform "across the line". As part of this research, the school was visited, and information from 41 students was collected. Also, 12 interviews were conducted (see Table 3). A sample of students studying in a Brazilian public school provides an overview of the student population.

Table 3. A sample of students studying in a Brazilian public school

Sex	Country of birth	Country of residence	Nationality/ nationalities	Father's country of birth	Mother's country of birth	Spoken language
9 women	34 Brazil	33 Brazil	30 Brazilian	26 Brazil	27 Brazil	41 Portuguese
31 men	5 Paraguay	8 Paraguay	3 Paraguayan	14 Paraguay	14 Paraguay	23 Spanish
1 unknown	1 unknown		7 Brazilian and Paraguayan	1 Argentina		12 Guarani
	1 Argentina*		1 Argentinian			

* The data regarding Argentina refers to three non-family related students.
Source: author's elaboration based on empirical data gathered in the school Ramiro Noronha

The excerpt of the interview with the student Rob provides a rich overview of his experience living and studying across the border:

> I have always studied in Brazil, my friends too. We used to come and study in the *fronteira* since I was very young. That is the reason why I think differently than my parents who studied and lived in Brazil, I can see it. I am Brazilian, but I spent my life in Paraguay. They [my parents] did not. To be honest, people like me living in the Paraguayan part and studying in Brazilian part [of the frontier] feel like we are in the middle [as I an overlap] of both countries because here all is one thing, one place… This is why they call us Brasiguaios. We have one history that we share and shared us [laughs]. Ask about the

> Paraguayan War [of the Triple Alliance], and you see [a loud laugh]. (Rob, Paraguayan, 21 [Paraguay, 15])[4]

At the time of the interview, Rob's parents lived in Paraguay, about 400 meters from the Brazilian school. This particular student is trilingual (speaks Portuguese, Spanish and Guarani). Along with the exposition to different languages in Brazil and Paraguay, some students may have a parent from each country (Dalinghaus & Pereira, 2008; Palacios de Carvalho, 2015); this is relatively common in bordering regions. Yet, not all students of Brazilian origin or with Brazilian documentation cross the border to receive education in Brazil. For example, Antônio received his education in a school in the eastern region of Paraguay; he explained:

> I did not study in Brazil; I only studied in Paraguay... I did not learn Guarani because our teacher was a Brasiguaia, do you understand? And another teacher, who taught us for a while, was Paraguayan. But he did not speak Guarani with us because there were only Brazilians in the colony he was teaching. There was not even one Paraguayan, to give you an idea. In our classroom, there was not even one Paraguayan; it was only Brazilians. Thus, he could not speak Guarani because nobody would understand (Antônio, Brazilian, 42 [Paraguay, 20], 1997).

Paraguay has Spanish as the official language and Guarani as the national language. While many Paraguayans may not speak Guarani in its capital Asunción, Guarani is still widely spoken throughout the country. However, participants reported that in areas with a population predominantly from Brazil or of Brazilian origin, Guarani is not always spoken, and the Portuguese language is widely used. Hence, engaging in transnational activities and learning without knowing the local languages well was still possible; it contributed to individuals' marginal role in Paraguayan society.

As seen in previous studies in other contexts, it is not a novelty that independently of the country of birth, many individuals, especially youth, may create and maintain a sense of belonging through links such as languages of their countries of origin (Archer et al., 2010). In the case of Brazilian descendants in Paraguay, the language of their parents and grandparents.

A regular connection may be reinforced through "technology of contact" (Vertovec, 2009). It has been seen that television and radio, nowadays also internet access, are relevant in the transnational context.

Returnees' experiences of migration and cross-border activities

The excerpts below illustrate a common narrative of self-defined Brasiguaios settled in Novo Horizonte do Sul, MS, and in the landless camp in Itaquiraí, MS. During 2013 visit to the landless camp, Romeu, a 57-year-old father of three, described the situation as follows:

[4] In order to protect the participants' identities, all participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. When citing excerpts from interviews, I use the following system: Pseudonym of the respondent, nationality, age (or approximate) at the time of the interview, (approximate) years living in Paraguay, year of return to Brazil.

> In the 1960s, the news that there was a lot of work in Paraguay went around in Mato Grosso [do Sul]. We did not have internet, but this kind of news travels fast. There was not much work in [the state of] Paraná because of the arrival of [agricultural] machines, and Paraguay needed people to clear the land that tractors couldn't clear. Many Brasiguaios here [in the landless camp] cleared area of forest that is today land suitable for planting. (Romeu, Brazilian, 57 [Paraguay, 25], 2009)

Romeu referred to the first wave of migration in the 1960s, when the Paraguayan government attracted impoverished Brazilian peasants to clear the land. Adelo, Romeu's friend, adds to this by mentioning the second migration wave, in which the Paraguayan government invested heavily in attracting agricultural workers of European origin living in Brazil to purchase land, produce and settle down in the country. Adelo, who has lived in the Antônio Irmão landless camp since returning with his family in 2009, explained his family's decision to emigrate from Brazil to Paraguay in 1968:

> My family went to Paraguay when I was a kid. We were poor, but people who had a small farm in Brazil could sell it and then buy a huge farm in Paraguay. So, a lot of people did it. It was much cheaper, like ten times cheaper, and it was very near to Brazil! So, many people went and stayed in Paraguay. (Adelo, Brazilian, 72 [Paraguay, 41], 2009)

Adelo's account is shared by many other self-identified Brasiguaios in the landless camp, as well as in interviews conducted in Novo Horizonte do Sul. It was also Edvanio's account:

> After the government of Paraguay made it easy for Brazilians to buy land over there in 1967, many poor people went [from Brazil] to Paraguay. Then, those who could not buy a piece of land lived on the land rented from farmers, as land tenants. In Brazil, it was more and more difficult to find work because of the mechanization of soybean production. (Edvanio, Brazilian, 73 [Paraguay, 20], 1985)

Edvanio's account is similar to the accounts provided by others. Along with Paraguayan policies, the migration of a large number of Brazilian rural workers to Paraguay can be attributed to Brazil's rapid mechanization of agricultural production in the 1960s and 1970s (Batista, 1990). Although no government records exist regarding Brazilian emigration to Paraguay, it is said that Brazilian President Geisel (1974-1979) aimed to support the occupation of 121 889 km²—33% of Paraguay's territory—with 1 200 000 Brazilians. This number of Brazilians would have constituted approximately 45% of the Paraguayan population at the time (Cortêz, 1993).

Related to these case studies, Guizardi reminds us that the Triple Frontier of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay serves as "articulating points for transnational migration (medium or long distance) of Paraguayan women and men displaced from rural areas". This is an area along the border that divides Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. Within the region, the Triple Frontier is widely known for the ability to cross the border with ease. More importantly, Guizardi's studies on female cross-border mobility and asymmetric gender responsibilities are still limited.

The female (re)productive overload has exposed women to cross-border forms of violence (Guizardi, 2020, p. 21). This was also found in this research; some women are led to engage in some transnational practices "on the other side" due to reproductive responsibilities.

Although many Brazilian rural workers emigrated to live in Paraguay, many families explained that they traveled from Paraguay to have their children delivered in Brazil. Initially, the relationship between this practice and their engagement in agricultural production was unclear. As the research progressed and it became clear that this was a common practice, their ultimate goal became evident: they wanted to ensure that their children had the right to a piece of land in Brazil.

This is because the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 states that Brazilian citizens have property rights. Facilitated by the opportunity to travel to Brazil, some families traveled to deliver their babies in Brazil to ensure their right to land in Brazil. José, a 67-year-old small farmer from Novo Horizonte do Sul, shared the following:

> We were poorer than now, but those who had an old car could visit Brazil… To travel 50 kilometers or more at the time was hard; the unmade roads were a nightmare to travel; they were not as good as now. Some people would just come to deliver their children in a Brazilian hospital or to register in Brazil their children born in Paraguay… by doing so, we could make sure our child may one day receive a piece of land. We have not had this opportunity yet, but they deserve to have this opportunity (José, Brazilian, 67, [Paraguay, 17], 1985)

Many families of Brazilian origin living in Paraguay seek to ensure their children's rights under the Brazilian constitution, to acquire a piece of land. Adding to the right to property, the Brazilian government has the power to impound land not fulfilling its social role to be used for agrarian reform (*Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil,* de 1988, article 184).

This was, in fact, a discourse present in the narratives of many of the research participants. Tiana, a 69-year-old mother of six from Novo Horizonte do Sul, explained how they use this practice to ensure their children's right to land. Tiana explained two of her children would not have received a piece if she had not delivered them in Brazil:

> They were eligible because they were adults in 1985, they had many years of experience working in farming, were married with children… but if they were registered in Paraguay, they would not even be considered by the Brazilian government because they would be Paraguayans! I saved their future [by delivering them in Brazil]. (Tiana, Brazilian, 69 [Paraguay, 9], 1985)

Tiana stated that most of her children were born in Brazil, but she "fixed" the situation a couple of times when she could not do so. Tiana falsely claimed that her children were born in Brazil, on a farm in a remote area, when she registered them in a Brazilian register office. Because the Paraguayan government, unlike Brazil, does not allow dual citizenship (the only exception is with Spain), a strategy for obtaining both citizenships for children born in Paraguay was to register them in Brazil too, sometimes under different names.

When we recall the literature on borders, migration, and other fields, studies have shown how the social context and distance living from a border(s) dictate the individuals' lives (Rendon-Ramos, 2019). Tiago, a 55-year-old father of five living in the

landless camp, offered a rich account of his experience as a small farmer in Paraguay; he explained:

> I went to Paraguay in 1978, a long time ago. I spent most of my life there. The land was almost free, but I was so poor that I could not buy an inch of land. Then, my father bought a small piece of land, and we had a good life. We produced things in Paraguay, and then sold them in Brazil without a problem; today, it is difficult… Paraguay has good land, and it was good to live there, but not anymore. Small farmers "lost space" for the rich Brazilian agribusiness people, you sell your land to them for a low price, or they support Paraguay landless groups to invade your land and cause damages, and then one day, you get tired and sell your land to them for a lower price. The good thing about being a peasant is that you can work anywhere; people need to eat everywhere they live. I have a different surname and date of birth in Paraguay, so I can even try to receive a piece of land from [the] Brazil [-ilian government]. (Tiago, Brazilian, 55 [Paraguay, 29], 2009)

This excerpt offers insight into the changing dynamics in Paraguay, which prompted him to return to Brazil in 2009. When asked why he is still living in the landless camp and working as a laborer in 2022, he replied: "it is because I was not granted my citizen right [a piece of land] as a Brazilian". Tiago was thinking about returning to Paraguay before the 2022 Brazilian presidential election, in which Lula da Silva was elected.

Tiago's intention to return to Paraguay was directly linked to the election of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in 2018: "We knew there would be no land reform from the day he won the election again", he said. It is now 2025, and Tiago is still living in the how sparsely populated landless camp hoping to receive a small piece of land. Tiago's hope that Lula would have agrarian reform as a priority of his third presidential term has not become a reality.

During President Lula da Silva's previous administrations (2003-2006 and 2007-2010), a total of 307 044 families were settled (Reis & Ramalho, 2015). Living in close proximity to another country, socio-political and economic changes have an impact on the daily lives of individuals residing within this border region. The increase in economic interaction within the border region may contribute regionally because it may still hold a peripheral role, not serving to diminish inequality with the rest of the territory (Mansvelt Beck & Hortelano Mínguez, 2016).

Data analysis

The transnationalism found in this border region is a reflection of the development of the dynamics in both border regions, continuously linking each other in an array of ways, accompanied by the development of short-distance forms of transnationalism; this is what the author has defined as *proximal transnationalism*.

In this research, data shows the narratives of the individuals living in the landless camp in Itaquiraí, MS, and those settled in 1985 in the town of Novo Horizonte do Sul, MS. These findings corroborate previous research and media reports on Brazilian agricultural workers in Paraguay. Since the beginning of the migration processes, the

geographical distance and ease of travel have facilitated engagement with practices spanning the Brazil-Paraguay border. In this case study, the choice of individuals to engage in cross-border activities is, in part, a reaction to the government land policies in both countries.

While governments contributed to the movement and resettlement of individuals across the border, individuals formed networks and strategies that embraced not only individuals but also state and non-state actors. The regular interaction with actors in both countries and, in some cases, the dependence on networks in different locations, allowed by proximity, had a significant transnational effect on their daily lives.

The aforementioned excerpts present the living collective narratives of residents settled in Novo Horizonte do Sul, MS, sharing similarities with narratives found in the landless camp. This comes as no surprise. The majority of people in both groups emigrated from Brazil to Paraguay between the 1960s and the 1980s. Both groups' experiences are marked by a migration process to Paraguay and a subsequent return to Brazil, with the ultimate goal of acquiring land in Brazil. As can be seen, their involvement in agricultural production and transnationalism contributed to the consolidation of their Brasiguaio identities as identities of impoverished people pursuing a piece of land across borders, whether in Brazil or Paraguay.

Scholars studying Brazil and Paraguay widely agree that the formation of the Brasiguaio identities accelerated after 1985. The return in 1985 was also significant in the history of Brasiguaios because it was the first organized group to return after contributing to the development of the Paraguayan border region through agricultural practices.

While they shared a common goal of acquiring land in Brazil, they relied on the assistance of various actors. The group of 1985 had the support of the Catholic Church group Comissão da Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission). Then, the group that returned in 2009 was assisted by members of the Brazilian Rural Worker's Landless Movement (MST).

Nonetheless, the MST was in its infancy in the first half of the 1980s; it was not fully formed and active in 1985. As previously stated, upholding Brasiguaio identity(ies) as a political instrument in 1985 had an effect; National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA, acronym in Portuguese for Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária) rapidly settled this landless group in an area in the town of Ivinhema, which is now the town of Novo Horizonte do Sul, MS. Despite upholding the Brasiguaio identities, the rural workers who returned to Brazil in 2009, living in the landless camp Antônio Irmão, are still not settled on a piece of land. While the former group upholds Brasiguaio identities as a symbol of success, the latter group upholds Brasiguaio identities without any outcome.

In short, the narratives of individuals in both cases are deeply marked by their engagement in practices spanning the Brazil-Paraguay border and by the pursuit of a piece of land for themselves and their offspring. This is supported, for example, by their practice of traveling to Brazil to deliver their children, or later "fixing" the situation when they were unable to deliver their children in Brazil, even if it meant circumventing the law, as any strategy appeared to be valid to ensure the right to property for their offspring. It symbolizes both loyalty to Brazil and a strategy to protect their constitutional right to land. They would have been unable to ensure their offspring's constitutional right to land in Brazil if they lived geographically distant from their country of origin or were prevented from crossing the border to deliver their children in Brazil.

Conclusion

An initial conclusion from this research is that the interaction between a diverse number of actors, governmental agencies, non-governmental institutions and ordinary people is still complex, and does affect each other. While the emergence of transnational activities spanning this border region and the formation of Brasiguaios identities were primarily reported by media outlets, examining this case study provides an advance in the theoretical notions of transnational processes occurring within border regions.

The advancement of what the author calls *proximal transnationalism* can be said to have tangible and theoretical effects. Tangibly, associated with the advance of technology and travel, along with the facility to cross the border, ordinary people have the ability to create and develop deeper transnational ties embracing two or more countries, having emigrated or not. From a theoretical perspective, this particular form of transnationalism deserves further investigation to contribute to the field of borders, frontiers, transnationalism, migration and related disciplines.

While it is vital to delimit the scope of any transnationalism concept, with the advance of the means of communication and transportation, no predicament will ever be sufficiently distinct but will embrace features from existing academic work. In turn, this will contribute to strengthening the field of transnationalism, which is still developing. Embracing the importance of living in geographical proximity to the country of origin, of the distance from the place of residence to another country, is essential in further developing and understanding transnationalism, albeit not exclusively, within or involving border regions.

The increasing effects of transnationalism within this border region have strengthened the links between the country of origin and residents. The case of rural workers living along the shared border between Brazil and Paraguay demonstrates how some groups have engaged in migration and transnational activities resulting from land policies. In this case, the rural workers' engagement in transnational activities and upholding the Brasiguaio identities are inextricably linked to their agricultural production.

Although it is unknown whether their children born in Brazil will receive a piece of land through agrarian reform, some families have attempted to secure their right to property in Brazil. It is still unclear what are going to be the future outcomes originating from engaging in the everyday life of Brazil and Paraguay. Because of their proximity to Brazil while living in Paraguay, the individuals' ability to engage in proximal transnationalism has shaped their experiences as agricultural workers and their Brasiguaio identities.

When comparing the overall experiences of returnees living in Novo Horizonte do Sul and the Brasiguaios living in the landless camp in Itaquiraí, it is seen that the pursuit of land for agricultural production has shaped their migration experiences, cross-border activities and identities. Although both groups returned from Paraguay to Brazil at different times and in different political contexts, and are in different situations, they share similarities: to receive a piece of land from the Brazilian government for subsistence and the Brasiguaio identities. Returning from Paraguay as landless rural workers, upholding Brasiguaio identities, reinforced their sense of entitlement to a piece of land in Brazil. It is important to recall that, given the differences, experiences and achievements, there is no Brasiguaio identity, but Brasiguaio identities.

Transnationalism is not static. In fact, understanding transnationalism involves embracing the fast-changing complex elements of two or more countries and the development of globalization. Thus, it is not enough to present some events. The reality of transnationalism is still complex. Research on the engagement of workers in transnationalism and their identities within border regions is still an area that deserves further attention from scholars and policymakers from around the world. As Proximal Transnationalism unfolds through intricate and ever-evolving processes, its dynamics continuously shift across borders and regions worldwide. Therefore, staying engaged is crucial—actively exploring its transformations and uncovering new insights to enrich our understanding of transnational connections in diverse border regions.

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